Letting Go: A Self-Study Utilizing Critical Literacy as Method in Improving My Practice

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Abstract

This is a Self-study about my role as a teacher, driven by the question: "How do I improve my practice?" (Whitehead, 1989)? In this study, I explored the discomfort that I had with the way that I had been teaching. Specifically, I worked to uncover the reasons behind my obsessive (mis)management of my students. I wrote of how I came to give my Self permission for this critique: how I came to know that all knowledge is a construction, and that my practice, too, is a construction.

I grounded this journey within my experiences. I constructed these experiences in narrative form in order to reach a greater understanding of how I came to be the teacher I initially was. I explored metaphors that impacted my practice, re-constructed them, and saw more clearly the assumptions and influences that have guided my teaching.

I centred my inquiry into my teaching within an Action Reflection methodology, borrowing Jack Whitehead's (1989) term to describe my version of Action Research. I relied upon the embedded cyclical pattern of Action Reflection to understand my teaching Self: beginning from a critical moment, reflecting upon it, and then taking appropriate action, and continuing in this way, working to improve my practice. To understand these critical moments, I developed a personal definition of critical literacy. I then turned this definition inward. In treating my practice as a textual production, I applied critical literacy as a framework in coming to know and understand the construction that is my teaching.

I grounded my thesis journey within my Self, positioning my study within my experiences of being a grade 1 teacher struggling to teach critical literacy. I then re-positioned my journey to that of a grade 1 teacher struggling to use critical literacy to improve my practice. This journey, then, is about the transition from critical literacy-
as-subject to critical literacy-as-instructional-method in improving my practice. I journeyed inwards, using a critical moment to build new understandings, leading me to the next critical moment, and continued in this cyclical way. I worked in this meandering yet deliberate way to reach a new place in my teaching: one that is more inclusive of all the voices in my room.

I concluded my journey with a beginning: a beginning of re-visioning my practice. In telling the stories of my journey, of my teaching, of my experiences, I changed into the teacher that I am more comfortable with.

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a person's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a person humanized or de-humanized. (Ginott, as cited in Buscaglia, 2002, p. 22)
null
What's been going on here?

(Newman, 1991, p. 53)

In critical moments we all realize that the only discipline that stands by us, the only training that becomes intuition is that got through life itself.

(Dewey, 1956, p. 17)

'Why' is so important because it sits at the very heart of learning: the spirit of curiosity, the purposes for which we set up a school system at all, the reasons we teach. Without why, whether implicitly or explicitly, the how's and what's don't matter very much.

(Thomas, 1988, p. 555)

My voice is not the only account of what happens in the classroom.

(hooks, 1994, p. 20)

Truth is a textual production.

(Denzin, 1994, p. 505)
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank, first and foremost, my thesis advisor, Dr. Carmen Shields. Without your guidance, assistance, and inspiration, this would be a wholly different and disengaged piece. For showing me the possibilities that lay within my Self, I thank you.

I wish to acknowledge my fellow Master's students whom I met along the way. In finding my Self among a community of learners, I was able to share my journey with others who journey themselves. Thank you for your feedback, your ideas, and inspirations.

I need to thank my father, from whom I continue to learn and draw inspiration. Dad, it is you who taught me to be the teacher I am today (intended or not!). I created a narrative about my experience that may come at your expense, yet without you, I would have no teaching metaphor to follow. Thank you for your interest and your unconditional support.

Finally, I need to thank my wife, Aimee. Without you, this text would still be a collection of sticky notes and journal entries. Thank you for your advice, your readings, your questions, and your patience. You kept me on track, gave me time and space, and everything I needed to create.
For You: A Reading Map

Welcome to my journey into my professional educational development. I need to, first and foremost, ground this text as a (re)construction of how I came to change the way I teach, the way I speak, and the way that I write. It is through the process of the construction of this text that I came to better understand my teaching. You are participating in this construction while you are uncovering your own personal meanings and understandings. Therefore, I need to take this opportunity to reveal aspects of my construction that may aid in your meaning-making process.

This text is a journey, one that I took during its construction. My journey wasn't as linear as this text may lead you to believe; yet I stayed true to the uncovering process through the narratives contained herein. It is through the writing of this text that I came to know my Self as a teacher. Therefore, I chose the present tense in which to ground my journey, to take my reader with me as I came to know(ing).

I use text boxes to add other dimensions to my writing, borrowing the idea from Judith Newman's (1991) book Interwoven Conversations. Those that are left justified and in italics are my own reflections and insights. These are offered to the reader to add to any point that I am making or highlight anything that can enhance the reader's understanding. They also serve as a reminder to the reader that this text is a construction and should be challenged accordingly.

The text boxes that are right justified are quotes that I feel are relevant to the point that I am making. Often they support the argument that I am making, but sometimes they serve to challenge and critique. In letting

This is my attempt at communicating in a different way--am I making this clear?

I have been working to change the way I speak and write. (hooks as cited in Denzin, 1994, p. 500)
these quotes hang beside my argument without specifically addressing them, I encourage my reader to draw his/her own conclusions from the possibilities offered. In this way, perhaps, new understandings and meanings can be formed, independent of my intent.

The narratives that are liberally spun and sprinkled throughout this text are blocked and italicized. I do this for dramatic effect. It is not my intent to separate the narratives from the rest of the text, but rather to add layers of possibilities, of meanings. Any reflections made in the present upon these narratives of past experience are separated by being written in a normal style. In this way, I travel backwards and forwards across time.

This journey attempts to chronicle my educational development as I work towards improving my practice. My own growth and development continue still, beyond the confines of this text. There was no definitive conclusion that I arrived at, no sense of closure that I reached, no grand sense of being “done.” I continue to grow and change, continue to improve my practice, yet I needed to draw this text to a close. Therefore, I am not done, though this text may be. Its conclusion is yet another aspect of its construction.

I offer this text now for others to read and critique, and hope my reading map supports your journey through my text.
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Chapter One: Coming To Know My Practice

Introduction

This is a Self-study where I examine my practice in an effort to improve it. I access the assumptions that guide my practice through narratives of my critical life experiences. In this Self-study I examine my voice within my classroom, how it governs and controls, and how it silences. I want to uncover the motives behind my (mis)management of my students, and I purpose utilizing critical literacy as a method of emancipation, both for my Self and my students. This Self-study is an exploration of a different way of coming to know, of a different way of teaching, of becoming a different kind of teacher.

Issues of Control

I believe in my Self as a teacher. I am good at a job that I love-yet it is more than that. It is not merely a job, but a vocation, a calling, something I have been chosen to do. But why do I do it? A teacher has a tremendous amount of authority embedded in his/her position.

To mould, to construct, to edify, and encourage towards greatness-this is quite the rush. But for me, it is much more than such fanciful egotism. I am a teacher because I feel teaching is worth doing. However, I am continually challenged to defend my position, my role as teacher. My first principal, the leader of our sinking ship, proclaimed, once, quite proudly in fact, that children often learn in spite of what we do. The gong-like implications are still reverberating within my practice. This possibility undercuts the Self-serving importance that I have placed on my job, yet I continue to do what I do because I feel it is worth doing.

Despite this glorification, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with my practice. There is something that I am doing, and have been doing since I began
teaching years ago, that keeps me uneasy. I love my job, but I feel that I am not
doing all that I can. I can be a better teacher—and it is this goal that drives me
through my journey of learning.

While examining the rules that I employ in my practice, I came to an uneasy
realization: I feel that I am sometimes more like a drill sergeant than a first grade
teacher. I am constantly vigilant for those who step out of line, and immediately
descend upon them in a barrage of accusations and reprisals. A quick shout, a well-
timed yell, a finger snap, a shout, a look, a crooked eyebrow—these things shoot out
of me throughout the day, all designed to keep my students operating within a
system that I control, that I dominate. One hand has my class firmly under my
thumb; the other hand is furiously driving the whip that moves them through the
curriculum.

Children must have order and structure to learn—that is a learning
environment that I believe works. This is what I strive to provide. Yet it is this view
that I hold that troubles me, and ultimately it is this

\[ \text{I name my behavioural management style like this to trouble it} \]
\[ \text{to claim that what I am doing may not be in the best interests of my} \]
\[ \text{students.} \]

that I seek to change. My discomfort with my
\[(\text{mis})\text{management arises because I have placed my} \]
\[ \text{Self at the centre of the room. I am the one in} \]
\[ \text{charge. So how can I trouble this dominance of voice while still maintaining a} \]
\[ \text{learning environment that works?} \]

\[ \text{In critical moments, we all realize that the only discipline that stands by us,} \]
\[ \text{the only training that becomes intuition is that got through life itself. (Dewey,} \]
\[ \text{1956, p. 17)} \]
What Am I Looking At?

I am examining my voice, and how I have positioned it within my practice. Carol Gilligan (1993) lists, among others, "the difficulty in hearing or listening to one's voice" (p. xxi) as a psychological division found among women. I, however, have had no difficulty in this area because my voice has been consistently validated, namely through my privileged position in society: a white, middle class, educated, fully abled, heterosexual male. My experiences are reflected and reproduced through the dominant culture, the dominant perspective, the dominant ideology to which I fully subscribe, that have served me well in the past. I have rarely felt voiceless or powerless (I have stated these two positions together, under the assumption that voice equates power, yet I know that to be untrue in many cases).

Within my teaching, it is my voice that governs and controls. In my grade 1 class, my voice states what is to be studied, explored, uncovered. It is my voice that is supported and validated through the curriculum and texts within my room. My schooling has served me well—I consistently see my Self reflected in the texts, the curriculum, the milieu—and these experiences are often unconsciously replicated in what I do. However, these experiences, drawn from my initiation in the dominant ideology, often leave others voiceless.

My voice also controls and (mis)manages within my classroom. It is my voice that tells the children what to do, defines expectations of behaviour, and keeps them within these expectations. It is my voice that is unquestioned within my practice. It is my voice that is the authority within my room. My voice, my experience, is valued in my classroom over everything else. I teach from personal experience, and it is this experience that I hang my meanings from. This begs the question, then: Whose voice is not being heard? Therefore, how do I trouble the notion of my voice-as-
authority, which exists at the expense of my students' voices/experiences/knowledge? How do I let go? This, then, is my problem: How do I share my voice with the other voices within my classroom?

bell hooks (1990) says, "As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, 'the politics of location' necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision" (p. 145). It is in my practice that I begin this process of revision. I am at the centre of my practice, but struggling to move, jockeying position to share the centre with those differing views that exist within my classroom. Therefore, it is with hooks again that I begin my journey-a mantra to keep me focussed on the challenge and forth-coming change: "My voice is not the only account of what happens in the classroom" (1994, p. 20).

What Led Me Here?

In this Self-study, I want to, as Bersianik (as cited in Lewis, 1996) says, "render visible the visible" (p. 40). To achieve this, I need to look at how I am teaching. Therefore, I need to turn my gaze inward towards my own practice and examine critical moments in my teaching. I need to examine these moments and challenge/disrupt that which I am doing to my students, in an effort to improve my practice.

Therefore, I will start with how I came to know that knowledge is a construction, a construction that is often suspect and needs to be revealed. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, (1997) discuss different ways of knowing, of coming to know. In examining my own teaching, I found resonance here. It is through this thesis journey that I have moved from teaching knowledge as a series of procedures to teaching that knowledge is a construction. In coming to know that knowledge is a
construction, I am able to examine my own practice as a construction. I can then see how I have constructed my teaching, and dismantle it accordingly.

**Procedural Knowing**

Belenky et al. (1997) discuss procedural knowledge as a way of coming to know the language of school and becoming adept at operating within this system. However, this initiation into this system comes at a cost, with the message: "Forget your so-called knowledge and memorize ours" (Belenky et al, 1997, p. 89). In looking at how I am teaching, I am asking my students to do exactly this. I am working to initiate them into a system that I control, one where they have to learn how to function appropriately, one in which I am constantly (mis)managing their behaviour so that they will comply. Belenky et al. discuss the experiences of a student in her development of procedural knowledge: “She used the strategy many students use: Find out what the guy wants, and give it to him" (p. 91). In relating this to my own personal experiences with procedural knowledge, I’ve reached a greater understanding of how procedural knowledge presently figures into my everyday teaching practices.

**My Own Coming To Know: Procedural Knowledge**

I was walking through the halls of Seneca College on my way to my Master’s class when I passed two students. The pair, evidently cramming for an upcoming exam, was discussing studying strategies. I overheard one of them say, as I was passing them: “I think he’s going to ask us about…".

I thought of my university days, only a few years behind me, and undergoing the same experience. I remember gambling with my studying time, trying to read the instructor and guess what would be asked, and studying accordingly. If I could figure out my teacher, I could predict the exam, and effectively not learn anything. Actually, I did learn something: how to memorize. I did not learn how to think. That came later.
I received my Bachelor of Arts degree at York University, majoring in English and Psychology. I state this for a number of reasons. I needed to name my degree because I feel there is an irony here. I was pursuing an Arts degree, and regardless of any other derogatory implications, I felt that an Arts education was an education in being human. I name the institution (York University) because in attending the third largest university (at the time) in Canada, I believed its size offered a diversity of course offerings and possibilities. I state my areas of interest because with English, I feel that I should have been taught to think about literature, reflecting back upon the human condition. With Psychology, I had hoped to reach a greater understanding of what it means to be human (can you sense a theme here?).

However, to be taught how think about these things, I had to fight to reach a state of awareness about my position within this educational institution. York was indeed very large, and had many different and exciting possibilities to offer. Personal contact with an instructor, though, was limited, if at all. I was reminded again and again that, to many at York, I was only a number (200689638). Instruction was based on this model, being tested in standardized form and marked accordingly. So to study, I simply had to memorize and then fill in the appropriate bubble when the time came to produce evidence of my learning.

Beienky et al. (1997) discuss this issue in becoming adept at procedural knowledge: "The teachers still wield the power: They write the rules of the game and rate the players' performances. But teachers and students can now speak a common language, and they can at least play at being colleagues" (p. 107). I learned how to play the academia game, jumping through hoops and meeting my instructor's expectations without fail. I learned the language of schooling in order to operate within the system in which I subscribed.
In looking at my past experience, how can I reach a greater understanding of my present experience in order to positively affect my future experiences? I need to understand what exactly I am doing to my students—because that is what my teaching has become: doing things to my students. I have imposed discipline because of my past experiences, specifically that from my first year of teaching. I have established this system that my students must operate in, and they must become adept at learning this system if they are going to be successful in my classroom. They too must learn how to read me, as the instructor, and learn to memorize the structure of the institution that we learn in. I believe I have to induct my grade 1 students within the institution of school, and they must learn how to behave appropriately within this system. However, they also have to learn how to think. Having reached this understanding, and deeming it wanting, where do I go from here?

My experience with procedural knowledge led me to where I could find my own voice, and then I really began to think. However, this came after I had mastered the mechanics of style, after playing the game and becoming intimate with the many hoops I was to jump through. Like Naomi, a college student the Belenky et al. (1997) text describes, I too came to an uneasy realization:

They (the teachers) do not insist that she agree with them but only that she use the proper procedures and they are willing—indeed eager—to teach her the procedures. They do not seek to silence her but to teach her a new language. (p. 92)

I had to become comfortable with this new language—and know it in order to manipulate it to my own educational gains. I had to come to know procedural
knowledge in order to gain admittance and acceptance in the institution in which I subscribed. I had to know how to play the game in order to leave it all behind-a rite of passage for those in the know-ing business.

**Constructed Knowledge**

What do I consider constructed knowledge to be? Belenky et al. (1997) claim:

> All knowledge is constructed and the knower is an intimate part of the known... To see that all knowledge is a construction and embedded is to greatly expand the possibilities of how to think about anything, even those things we consider to be the most elementary and obvious. Theories become not truth, but models for approximating experience. (pp. 137-138)

To realize this perspective of knowledge, I have to place my Self at the centre of my inquiry, and accept that to reach any understanding, I have to construct meaning for my Self. Belenky et al. write of constructed knowers: “To learn to speak in a unique and authentic voice, women must 'jump outside' the frames and systems authorities provide and create their own frame” (p. 134). In becoming a constructed knower, I had to understand that knowledge is created in relationship to others, to previous experiences, within one's own worldview.

**My Own Coming to Know: Constructed Knowledge**

My own growth and change occurred when I began to understand the nature of knowledge. This came when I stepped outside of my constructed confines to create texts that more accurately reflected my own learning.

> It wasn't until my fourth year (out of a 5 year degree, having done my Bachelor of Education degree concurrently) that I found the possibility and courage to step out of the constructed confines of procedural knowledge and produce pieces of work for my Self, not for my teacher. I remember feeling as if I had stepped over the edge of a very deep precipice, and I was very nervous about where I would land. I remember handing in my first paper in
this new voice, and literally shaking, nauseous with nervousness. With my knees weak, there was a moment when I held on to the paper, gripped it for a few seconds longer than was necessary, and my professor had to gently pull the paper away from me. My head swam as I returned to my seat, with a voice inside my head screaming:

“OH MY GOD WHAT HAVE YOU DONE GET IT BACK ARE YOU CRAZY????!!!”

It became much easier after that.

This new voice was a long way from finding relevant quotes from noted scholars and stringing them together to form an adequate thesis, which is the game I had learned while learning the system. I had stepped outside of my own frames of expectations when beginning to construct knowledge for my Self, and my discomfort came from operating outside a system that had previously served me so well. However, it was still far from where I am now-and still moving. In university, I still stayed within the prescribed form, having fun flexing and pushing the boundaries a little, but I still had so much to learn. That learning began in earnest when I attended graduate school.

Graduate school has been an enlightening experience, though it didn’t start off that way. I eagerly pursued my piece of paper—but a curious thing happened: I began to think, and more important, I began to think about thinking. I began to see the construction within texts, and how these texts were created to reflect the message embedded within them. If knowledge is a construction based upon meanings connecting to experiences, then the following narrative is my attempt at revealing the construction of my text reflecting my own coming to know.
Something needs to go here. I need to create a piece that reflects how I have come to the place where I am now... where I have become a constructed knower; something that shows that I have begun to think about my thinking. I need to place my Self at the centre here, and demonstrate how far I have come in my learning. How can I tell about how I have come to know that knowing is a construction, a step in the meaning-making process?

I can write about a critical moment I had during my last class in my Master's of Education program. A fellow classmate read out a piece of her writing. I can compare how she was early in her journey and see if I can draw a correlation to where I once was. She said that she was inspired by my reading of "My Father's Legs," done the week previous. I can mention how my fun with fonts has inspired her to push her learning forward-to step away from the constructed confines of a method that held her Self captive for so long. I can write about how emotional she became during her reading. I can write of the power of I, and how crucial it is for an authentic learning journey.

I could write about my own learning journey. I can speak about how my focus has changed. I can tell how I started in September 2001 with the idea of critical literacy. I was intent on creating a curriculum guide and corresponding resources to support the development of this learning skill. I can tell of my illusions of grandeur that surrounded that project: This was how I would make my fortune! I could tell of how I thought I would be filling a need, as clearly there is a call for making kids think at a higher level, and there is certainly money to be had in the educational business.

I could tell of how I gradually became dissatisfied with this idea, as it somehow seemed inauthentic. I was not figured prominently within this inquiry. I can write about how I met my thesis advisor, Dr. Carmen Shields, who is a dedicated Narrativist. I can write of my initial dismissive attitudes towards narrative methodologies. I can tell of how I enjoyed going through the motions of creating narrative pieces, but I knew they wouldn't figure into my final thesis. In fact, I saw the course on Narrative Methodologies as a
break from my serious course work. I can write about how, as I continued through that course, I began to look at my Self. My teaching then began to improve because of this reflective lens. I can write about how I began to see that I was at the centre of my teaching, and if I was to create a meaningful piece of work worthy of a Master's degree, then I needed to place my Self at the centre of my inquiry.

I can construct a piece that reflects the power of Jack Whitehead's seemingly simple question: "How do I improve my practice?" (1989). I can write about how this question took me to the centre of my inquiry, and changed my focus inward, to my classroom, to my teaching, to my Self. I can tell about how liberating it was to talk in the first person, and not feeling that I was contributing something that was somehow inferior to the body of educational knowledge.

However, the gradual shift inwards to examining my Self was almost too subtle. There was no determining moment, no grand "Ah-ha!" that I could create a piece around. Instead, it was slow, sneaky. It crept up on me when I wasn't paying attention. So if I were to write about this realization, it would have to be an equally meandering piece, to reflect the process itself.

I could tell about when I began to see that I could turn the critical thinking method that I had been developing inward to my own practice. In doing this, I could upset the inadequate assumptions that had long guided my teaching. I can tell of how I came to understand that my students were constructing meaning from what I was delivering/imposing on them, and I needed to reveal to them what my intents were, what I was trying to do to them. But then I would have to include pieces of the journey from then on, to reflect the path my learning took. I would have to include stories of the critical moments that led me to change the way that I teach. I would have to write about how I began to treat my practice as a text that was being read by my students. I would have to write about the possible meanings that they were constructing from this text. I would have to write about how I tried to include the voices of my students in this meaning-making experience.

This would be a daunting task, as this learning has sometimes been slow and sometimes occurred quickly. It is through my thinking and my thinking about my thinking that I have reached a greater understanding of
who I am as an educator. I now teach with the understanding that all knowledge is a construction and it is how I construct within my teaching that I am now aware.

Within the context of my own learning journey, in struggling to improve my practice, how does being a constructed knower figure within this thesis journey? Being a constructed knower brings new understanding to my practice. It is not my intent here to force my students to become constructed know-ers. Rather, I believe that students must themselves come to this realization. However, I can examine the constructions that inform my teaching, in an attempt to "render visible the visible" (Bersianik as cited in Lewis, 1996, p. 40). In looking at the reasons why I teach, I can better re-construct my practice in a way that includes the voices of my students.
Chapter Two: Knowing How Come I Practice

To understand how I came to this place in my practice where I began to question it, I need to situate it firmly within my own personal experiences. I need to reveal the experiences that inform my practice, that contribute to the construction, and that leave my teaching wanting. I need to examine why I am dissatisfied with what I am doing now. I need to, as Jack Whitehead (1989) suggests, offer “a description and explanation of practice which is part of the living form of the practice itself” (pp. 45-6). Therefore, I offer a re/construction of my past educational (in)experiences, that act as a metaphor for my own teaching practice. Through this narrative, I reach a greater understanding of who I am as a teacher, and more important, WHY I became the teacher I was. It is through the un-covering of meaning within this narrative that I come to better know how I have constructed my practice.

Personal Teaching Metaphor: My Father’s Legs

I awake to the familiar Saturday morning sounds. He is a master of variation upon a single theme. This morning it is pots and pans being “sorted,” but it could have been the vacuum outside of our room, a buzz saw, a food processor, or any other electrical torture implement. Hey, the day’s half over! he inevitably shouts up, prompting us to simultaneously groan and get up. It is no use resisting, his resolve is implacable. Breakfasted, watered and fed, we stumble out into the early morning light. This morning it is the car.

My father has a firmly held work ethic. He is early to bed, early to rise personified. He never seems to accomplish much and does not have a deep pride in his activities, but he completes them nevertheless. He insisted on being the instructor of these empty activities to us. On that particular day it would be the wonder of the home-done oil change.

The breeze is light, warm with the spring air, heavy with the scent of lilacs from the neighbour’s trees. The early morning light is peeking through the
branches of the trees overhead, just beginning to blossom and bloom. It should have been a joyous time, but I am bitter and resentful. The crunch of the gravel and car tires, slow in their approach, echo silently among the trees and the house. I stand back, my brother directing. The car gradually approaches the ramps, placed strategically on the poured concrete pad. A large piece of cardboard has been laid under the car ramps, covering up the oil marks left from the car we were about to operate on. My brother confidently and competently directs the car up onto the ramps, with signals that eventually lay to rest the behemoth beast in its unnatural position. The ignition killed, the car lay to rest, its nose pointing up, as if about to take flight, and soar away from all this ineptitude.

My father is still the King of Used Cars. He buys these old machines and beats them into the ground, only to repeat the cycle with another unfortunate victim. However, his mechanic skills are very limited, being able to change fluids, wiper blades, and boost a dead battery. He has no talent when it comes to the internal mysteries of an engine, yet continues to invest in cars that require this amount of care. And that legacy stands before me now. I resist, but it never strays too far-to be the owner of unfortunate cars is in my genes.

He slams the car door and comes around to inspect the car’s resting place. With tires and brakes firmly in place, the car is secured and ready to be serviced. I stand back and watch the scene unfold predictably. He collects the oil bucket from the garage. It is an old bulk-ketchup tin, the word Heinz long obscured by oil, grease, and dirt. I know exactly where it is kept, where it waits, patiently anticipating the spring ritual. He carries it reverently, dressed in his greasy overalls, blue and faded. I stand and watch. He pops the hood and raises it impossibly above our heads. He arranges his tool box, conveniently out of his reach, and places himself in position: He lies down on his back and shimmies underneath the raised car until only his legs, clad in faded blue overalls, are visible. My brother and I have before taken turns boosting ourselves up to see through the opened hood, through the various engine parts, to catch glimpses and pieces of him lying prone, wrestling with
the under workings of the family car. These fragmented views were few and far between. Mostly I just stand back and watch. And there I stand, and watch. When he has arranged himself, severed from view, his voice hollers, travelling along his outstretched legs to my brother and me:

*Hand me the ratchet and a head! No, bigger! Not so big! Give me the Phillips screwdriver! No, the black one! That's not it! Give me the orange one! Hand me the bucket! Goddamnit!!*

*I stand there and watch, with only his legs visible.*

My father inevitably got splashed with oil as it came gushing from its hold, yet he never seemed to learn from this. He cursed, he cleaned himself up, and moved on.

*He waits under the car for an uncountable amount of time, still and silent.*

*When the gush has turned to a trickle, then to a drip, he recommences again with the orders. He places things back into place, sends out tools, asks for others, and slides out the oil bucket, sacred with its new contents mixed with the blood of victims past. He follows the bucket out and carefully returns it to its home in the garage, out of reach of little children and family pets. I am relieved to see it go. He returns with new plastic bottles of oil, quickly dirtying due to the state of his hands. He also has an ancient funnel, clear plastic, smudged to grey in its age. He places the bottles and funnel into the opening of the hood, nestled out of sight, I believe, within the parts of the engine. He bends into the open mouth of the car, consumed from sight, save his legs. His legs are placed firmly on the ground, shuffling as he barks his orders, which are muffled as the engine chews his words.*

*I am always scared when looking at an engine. I can never decipher its parts, save for the dipsticks and the washer fluid container. When I encounter car trouble, I always check to see if these are in place. Car won't start-well, its full of windshield fluid: I'm out of ideas. I'd have hoped for a better grounding in the art of vehicle maintenance, but my schooling has yet to serve me well.*

*He collects his empty bottles, his funnel, wiping his hands on the ever-present dirty rag. He returns to the garage, garbage for some, sacred*
storage for others. He returns to tidy his tools, placing them all back in their compartments, and returning these to the garage. I stand well back and watch. He returns and slams the hood with authority. He opens the door and sits in the driver’s seat. I hold my breath. The car roars into life. He eases it back down to earth, back onto the gravel driveway, and kills the engine, back again where we started. He exits the car and shuts the door. He grabs the ramps and the huge cardboard piece, and returns these to the garage. He shuts the garage door and firmly latches it. We are done. I am free.

Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by another human being. Each of us owes deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this light. (Schweitzer, cited in Saye, 2002, p. 39)

My Experience, My Metaphor: Re-Covering Meaning

Close to 20 years later, I re-vision this ritual. The image of my father’s legs haunts me. The legs that instructed me, that taught me how to change the oil in the car-they remain ever ineffectual. I was “taught,” but I never experienced, never participated, and never even witnessed, yet I was expected to have learned.

In examining my own teaching practice, I question if my students are learning. I consciously try to show them, to let them see, to let them try-to experience the challenge of learning. I try to factor in their motivation, their willingness to participate, for participate and be active they must.

Children are active; children are different at the various stages of their growth. Engaged in transactions with an environment, each one must effect connections within his or her own experience. Using whatever capacities they have available, each one must himself or herself perceive the consequences of the acts he or she performs. (Greene, 1978, p. 47)

To be an effectual teacher, I believe I need to facilitate these transactions between my students and their environment. I need to guide them along the way. I believe
that I need to invite them in, and get them to bear witness to the miracles I am trying
to show them. They need to get dirty-feel the oil and grease themselves, get
splashed by the gush of the life-fluid.

The problem, most will agree, is not to tell them what to do-but to help them
attain some kind of clarity about how to choose, how to decide what to do....
The problem in teaching is to empower persons to internalize and incarnate
the kinds of principles that will enable them to make such choices. (Greene,
p. 48)

However, what I believe and what actually happens are two different issues,
as Jack Whitehead (1989) describes. He discusses the contradiction in having
values and the subsequent experience of negating these values within one's
practice. This is what is occurring to me. I hold these values of experience and
participation within one's own education, yet that is not what is occurring within my-
class. This is my struggle over my (mis)management issues and how I wish to
improve my practice. I am not guiding the instruction within my practice; I am
delivering it, and my students are expected to receive it. Reflecting back to those
Saturday mornings, I see now that I have seized the tools within my classroom and
am in charge of the instruction. It is I that barks orders for the children to comply
with-they fetch what I ask, and they stand back and watch. They have no real say in
what the expectations are, for these were wrought out of the trauma of my first year
of teaching. The point I've come to realize is that, within how I have constructed my
practice, I control the learning, I structure the environment, I own the learning.

The thing about management by one is that the others don't manage
themselves / don't share in the control. They must spend valuable time
reading you instead of making judgements on their own. What happens if
you are not present? Who owns the learning? How do we teach and learn control and behaviour for ourselves? Whose classroom is it? (Dr. Carmen Shields cited in personal journal, Spring 2002)

I have positioned my Self as my father. I have re-placed my father's vision of instruction with my own, yet it remains mine, not that of my students. I now have become the centre of my classroom.

Within my narrative account of my father, I feel frustrated that I am not involved as a learner. Now I am involved—so much so that I am now the one IN CHARGE. I am barking for tools, with my kids handing them in and standing back. So how do I effect a change within this relationship? Can I re-vision a new metaphor, one divorced from my own ineffectual experience? I am wary of my father's legs, yet I need to yield control of the tools which I have firmly grasped. I am slowly reconstructing my teaching/learning metaphor, re-visioning it with my Self, lying alongside my father.

I am nestled alongside him, holding a tool while he points up, explaining and showing.

Here, now you try. A little harder. Is it giving? Good. Nice and slow. Watch out!! Here’s the rag—you okay? All right. Grab the bucket—ease off the screw—hold on to it. Is it coming out? Let it come, wait for it to be done.... I’ll take the bucket, you put the screw back on. Got it? Good job, son.

My father is teaching me, and I am learning.

Teaching, Experience: (re)Formation of Voice

To further my examination of my practice, I turn now to my past teaching experiences. It is because of these experiences, gained in the first year of my teaching, that I teach the way that I do. It is this “Trial by Fire” that has done the most in the formation of my practice. It is this experience of teaching that has re-


Fusce euismod massa at risus rhoncus, eget volutpat dui suscipit. Sed vel ante id magna ultrices ultrices. Sed vel ante id magna ultrices ultrices.
formed my voice, from understanding that knowledge is a construction to one that dominates and controls the knowledge/learning. In reflecting back upon my past teaching experiences, I attain a greater clarity of who I am as a teacher, un-covering the motivations that (in)form my voice within my practice. In examining these experiences, I am able to challenge and disrupt my voice, revealing the construction.

I work in an institution that is primarily devoted to the socialization of children into the citizens of tomorrow. As a grade 1 teacher, I am expected to teach in a creative and energetic way, all the while covering a multitude of curriculum expectations in about 190 teaching days. I am also expected to look ahead and prepare my students to cope with provincial testing, which is inflicted on all students in grades 3 and 6 within all public elementary schools of Ontario. There is a terrible pressure on teachers to get students to perform well on these tests that are supposedly designed to measure students’ thinking abilities. A poor performance reflects poorly on a teacher and a school. Often interrupting all of this instruction is the behaviour of the students within this dominant ideological system. It is within this climate that I began my teaching career.

Becoming a teacher is a tremendous learning experience. I have already included a narrative to illustrate my personal teaching metaphor, yet I feel I need to balance it with my actual experience within this profession that has deeply (a/e)ffected my teaching and my Self. For this, I focus on a story of my evaluations from my first year of teaching.

The Day the Principal Came: A Document Analysis

My first year was hell, justified by others that stridently upheld the culture of the school as “Trial By Fire” – thus normalizing the atrocities. In fact, there was nothing normal about my first year of teaching.
I worked at an inner-city school in Toronto. I had five children who were severely behaviourally challenged (due, in a large part, to the atrocities that they had lived through, which they then inflicted upon me). I had two other children who took advantage of my inexperience and decided to push my buttons whenever they could. I had four children who struggled for mastery of the English language. I had three children who, when scraping the barrel of academic prowess, you found them. The rest of the class drowned in their mediocrity, doomed to demand no attention. This was my class, a farce in its outrageousness.

I was hired, ideally, to team-teach with the other grade 1 teacher, as I was replacing the brighter half who was leaving for bigger and better things. My new partner was in her third year of teaching, just beginning to exert her own independence and develop her own confidence. To her, I attached my ship and was led unswervingly into my first year of teaching. I was idealistic. I thought I could make a difference. I thought I could change the world. I was sadly mistaken.

The day had arrived, full on like an unstoppable train: The principal would be in to observe my classroom. It was the first time she had been in, but not the first time she had dealt with my kids, the path being well worn from my door to hers.

I greeted my kids with my plastic smile, hoping it would temporarily improve our relationship. However, my heart sank as I met my challenge of the day: A young boy in my class, having witnessed his mother’s abuse and subsequent failure to leave, having been openly rejected by his new stepfather, and prone to such black and dark brooding fits that nothing could draw him out, dragged himself up the stairs and sat resolutely down outside my door. I knew that nothing I did would convince him to come in. So I left him out there, this having become standard practice as he had worn me out months ago. It was May, and the principal was finally coming for a formal evaluation.

The rest of the children, noisy and with much spectacle, congregated on the carpet area for the morning calendar. I read a story in a half-hearted effort to maintain control (see previous statement about standard practice). When I was finished, I explained to them that we would be having a special
visitor that day-THE PRINCIPAL!!!! (much oo-ing and aw-ing was had by me, the rest remained unimpressed). I told them that she wanted to come to see who was ready for grade 2 (maybe they bought it) and we should show her our best behaviour!! I rushed through calendar and the language activity of the morning, hoping and praying that they wouldn’t pick up on my nervous energy, as I tiptoed around potential behavioural landmines, allowing them leeway to avoid confrontations. My dark charge managed to crawl in, unannounced, and found his way to a quiet corner in the room. This was a good sign, as he wasn’t looking to provoke any aggression from me or from the other children. I let him be. Recess came, and I frantically gathered composure.

The bell rang again, and we all reassembled. My brooding time bomb was there as well. Maybe recess (and my prayers!) had done some good. But before I could insulate this success and ensure a trouble-free stay for the remainder of the day, the principal was at my door, asking for entry. I invited her in and launched into math. I was good. I was energized and active, bringing the math concept to life (which is a feat for me, as I have openly despised math for quite a few years now). I had manipulatives going, charts, posters, a three-ring circus and a dog that could juggle! I was on fire. I was somewhere in the middle of this giddy hallucination when I noticed that my angry young boy had turned me off, and was crawling slowly away to seek solace under some desks. As luck would have it, he chose to go where the principal was sitting. To my delight, she tried to engage him, and it suddenly became HER RESPONSIBILITY!!

She missed the remainder of my superstar lesson, as she, more and more desperately, tried to engage this boy and convince him to come out. She began to see what I lived with, day in and day out—a brick wall of obstinacy—with no strategy for success. The lesson was over and I sent the children back to their desks to complete the tasks. The principal had to move, as she was sitting at a particularly vocal child’s desk. My angry boy had to leave too, as the same vocal child was as efficient with his feet as with his tongue. My sullen charge slunk away to his desk to stare accusingly at the worksheet and stew in his mood. I maintained my manic pace by flitting around the room, quelling insurrections and objections, prompting and
explaining, and praying for the lunch bell to ring. It finally did, and we all escaped. And that was that.

**Documenting (in)Experience**

It is interesting to me that this snapshot of my year had been "documented" on paper, pink at that, within a formal evaluation. However, these evaluations do not bring to life the necessary context of which I lived through. However, according to these evaluations, it is not the atrocities that matter, contrary to what the previous narrative may suggest. It is how I (mis)manage these behaviours that counts, as evidenced in my teaching evaluations.

My two evaluations contain one- and two-lined sentences, under various headings, encapsulating my practice in a formalized, bureaucratic text. Nowhere in the evaluation is my voice, only the voice of the institution. The formation of my teaching voice came from these experiences, yet in evaluating these experiences, I am left voiceless.

On the first evaluation, I rate Satisfactory on all components of my practice (except for Class Management, which rated a Needs Improvement). In the second, dated a few weeks later, I score straight Satisfactorys! There is no place within the evaluation that gives a context to my experience within that classroom. However, there are hints, hidden in the uncomfortable rhetoric, of the struggle and challenge I experienced that year. For example, in the first evaluation (May 16, 2000), under Class Management, it is written:

Most of the students in the room have internalized the classroom routines. Michael needs to continue to develop clear and concise expectations and consequences. Discipline is an area that Michael needs to focus his attention on.

Under Summary of Recommendations:
Michael has made good progress in getting a handle on the curriculum. He needs to continue to work on his classroom management.

Two weeks later (May 29, 2000):

Michael is continuing to focus on his classroom management skills. He is learning to not take students’ little outburst [sic] and/or misbehaviours personally.

Under Summary of Recommendations:

Michael has made good progress in getting a handle on some of the behaviours in his class. He needs to continue to develop strategies to help him deal with behaviours in the classroom in a more effective manner.

By then, I had become so jaded and exhausted that the students’ spitting and profanity were normalized. These indiscretions were not directed at me; they were simply part of the daily routine. I was still inexperienced, yet cooked a crispy black, barely surviving my trial. The fire had consumed me, and I was counting the days until I could start my do-over, my chance to do things better. That year, I did not teach—I survived.

*Impacting My Practice, My Voice*

This evaluation is a small piece, frozen in time, isolated from the stories that bring it a more cohesive meaning. Yet, when considering my practice today, over 4 long years from that date, it brings greater meaning to my present teaching. I believe my obsessive (mis)management of their behaviour can be linked back to that first year, that first group of kids, and can be nailed down in time to that day the principal came. I am this way because of that experience (which is evaluated on those pink papers). And it is this over-management, this centring of MY VOICE, that I seek to change as I engage in this Self-study.
These experiences that I have re-covered lead me to a greater understanding of who I am as a teacher. In looking at my personal teaching metaphor, I am able to re-vision my experience to come to understand why I teach the way that I do. In looking at my past teaching experiences, I can see how my practice has been influenced by my trial by fire. These experiences of mine, selected from many, combine to form personal truths that I hold that influence how I teach.

In this Self-study, I want to look at these truths. I want to challenge and disrupt these truths, critique in order to improve my practice. "Truth is a textual production" (1994, p. 505), Norman Denzin claims. In treating my own practice as a personal textual production, I need to find a way to challenge and critique my teaching and free my Self from the assumptions that guide it. I need to look at my voice within my practice, challenge the dominant position that I have (mis)placed it in within my teaching, to find a way back to a constructive perspective. I need a way to listen to the critical moments in my teaching and work towards improving my practice.
Chapter Three: Action Reflection in my Practice

I borrow the term "Action Reflection" from Jack Whitehead (1989), which I feel is an accurate description of the action research methodology that I choose to enact. In order to improve my practice, I need to find a way into my practice. Therefore, I chose Action Reflection as my methodology to understand my teaching. Since my teaching is intensely personal (I teach from personal experience, as discussed in the previous chapter), it makes sense to me to use Action Reflection in order to understand my Self in this Self-study. In maintaining this claim of Self-study, I am able to integrate different methods into my research that contribute to my understandings of my Self: narrative, writing, document analysis, and the methods associated with Action Reflections. Though it may be unorthodox to combine these seemingly different methods from seemingly different qualitative traditions, it makes sense to me, the one on this journey. The following discussion is an elucidation of my own personal understandings of what Action Reflection means to me, how I construct meaning from the methods I've chosen, and how I work to improve my practice utilizing this methodology.

What Is Action Reflection?

My Action Reflection is a living educational theory (Whitehead, 1989). By claiming this definition, I allow myself to inquire into my own educational development, to generate a claim of personal knowledge, leading me to improve my practice, and subjecting this claim to public criticism (Whitehead). I frame my inquiry in a living form-within my Self, generating questions and seeking answers throughout the heart of the debates is the issue of whose knowledge is at stake and what kind of theory is generated. I believe that action research in a living theory key allows all people to make claims that they have improved the quality of their own learning, and to show how that learning potentially influences the lives of others for good. (McNiff, 2000, p. 202)
my journey (Whitehead). For me, it is a "generative transformative process, making all new moments more life-enhancing than the previous ones" (McNiff, 2000, p. 200). I express this process, centrally guided by my Self as the researcher/practitioner/reflection-er, in the following way:

I reach a critical point in my practice;

I feel the need to act;

I act in a chosen direction;

I monitor and evaluate my actions;

I change the direction of my actions in the light of my evaluations. (McNiff, p. 202)

This is my Self-study, and it is my Self that I seek to change. I've reached a critical point in my practice: I have become obsessively concerned with management and control; I am not effectively engaged in my instructional strategies or with my students. These statements focus on how my practice needs to change, and I must develop ways to address this need and transform my practice and my Self (since my practice is personal). I must develop personal theories about my practice and uncover the meanings that inform my actions. My focus to facilitate this change is on critical literacy as a method of emancipation for my Self in this respect. I then evaluate this process and develop more ways to meet my needs as a practitioner, developing more theory from my personal knowledge, challenging and growing, always striving to improve. I continue to develop ways to improve my practice in this cyclical pattern. Out of this change a new form of teaching develops, leading to more change, and more transformations, and so on in this cyclical way.

McNiff outlines key elements of Action Reflection:

1. I, the researcher, am central to the process;
2. I am learning first about my Self in order, possibly, to change a social situation;
3. I am not aiming for closure but ongoing development;
4. The process is participative;
5. The process is educational. (2000, p. 203)

McNiff brings up salient aspects of my profession. Teaching is an intensely personal profession, where my rules and principles guide my everyday actions and my personal stories affect the education and lives of my students. Therefore, when undertaking this research, it makes sense to me to place my Self at the centre: the centre of challenge, change, and reflection. To enact this change, I need to know about my Self in order to affect my Self, my students, and my colleagues. If I am looking to impact my Self, my students, and my colleagues, then I need to involve them within this development and education. Action Reflection makes the most sense to me in research terms because it involves everything that I feel is important. Before I begin my discussion of my chosen practical methods of Action Reflection, I need to expand upon the above principles and how they are addressed within my research context.

Me, My Self and I

As this research is a Self-study, I need to place my Self firmly and soundly in the centre of any reflection, change or development during this process. As McNiff claims: “My research becomes a site for my own learning as I attempt to change my situation, and as I struggle to turn my values into practice” (2000, p. 203). In that I am trying to change my practice by enacting my newly learned values into action, I need to access the values that I held previously. Therefore, I need to construct my
inquiry around my own personal stories and narratives. As my teaching is influenced by my experiences, created as a result of the values that I hold, I need to access these experiences. For this, I choose the power of story. As Crites claims, “experience is illuminated only by the more subtle process of recollection” (1971, p. 300). In re-collecting and re-constructing these experiences, I reach a greater understanding of my practice.

Since this is a personal journey about reflection on my practice, I need to ground this journey firmly within my Self and my own claims to knowledge. Therefore, I lay claim now to the authority of my own voice, the power of my perspective, and the undeniable personal truth of my own experience. This is my journey, my own re-visioning. It is with I that I begin.

From Me To You

The values I seek to re/un-cover change my practice, which in turn affect those I teach and work with, which I then share with you, the reader. “No one should make judgements about other people’s situations until they have shown how they have worked to improve their own” (McNiff, 2000, 203). In starting with me, I move backwards and forwards through time, discovering hidden values and truths that I hold that affect my practice. I either claim these or discard them before moving outwards to the social constructions in which I work. In beginning with my own stories, generated from within my Self, I move out to improve the greater social aspects of my practice, which are imbedded in this text.

In re-creating my experiences of becoming and being a teacher, I invite readers into this experience. As Denzin claims, “authentic understanding is created when readers are able to live their way into an experience that has been described and interpreted” (1994, p. 506). In re-creating my experiences in an honest way, I feel I
have created a testament to my practice and created a text that describes how I came to change that practice. In interpreting these experiences, I am able to reach out and offer a shared understanding with readers into my own values and truths, into my personal construction of my practice.

With this shared authentic understanding comes the issue of validity, a tricky debate within interpretive research. In moving my text from my Self outwards to a critical public, I rely on the work of Jack Whitehead (1989). He suggests that when judging a claim of knowledge, the reader is to focus on how I have come to know my own educational development. In creating this text, I “translate what has been learned into a body of textual work that communicates these understandings to the reader” (Denzin, 1994, p. 500). I see the strength of this journey as being reliant upon the construction of this text, and how it is able to bridge understandings from my Self to the reader. Though this text originated from my own practice, in an effort to improve it, I construct this text to contribute to the greater body of educational research/reflection.

To Un/Happily Ever After

The most difficult aspect of this research/reflection is the understanding that I will not reach a clearly defined end point; that I will not “finish” in the finite sense of the word. To paraphrase McNiff (2000), I need to show how I deal with turmoil, which is the core value of Action Reflection. I tell the stories of my struggles and how I try to work through them. This understanding leads to new understandings, always changing, always in flux, adapting to the social constructions of my profession. My teaching remains grounded within a living educational theory, constantly asking “Why?” and then seeking answers to satisfy that inquiry. My journey already is beyond the descriptions of this text, yet I choose to end it with a
beginning: a new perspective, a new instructional framework, a new approach. So this text, then, can be viewed as an autobiographical snapshot of my struggle to improve my practice. The conclusion of this text is constructed, a personally chosen point along a developmental continuum, much like the text opening, arbitrarily chosen as the beginning of my journey. I am still struggling and improving; yet I am aided by the understandings gained through this journey.

Who's In This With Me?

McNiff claims, "Action research is always work with others" (2000, p. 204). I don't work in isolation, I don't live in isolation, and therefore I can't learn in isolation. I reflect upon my interactions with my students in my transformative journey, as well as colleagues and others. The creation of this text is a process, as is the re-creation of experiences, the reflections, and actions taken. As these processes involved interactions with others that influenced my journey, from my students to my colleagues, fellow Master's students to my thesis advisor, it was created through relationships with these others. Denzin (1994) writes: "Field workers can neither make sense of nor understand what has been learned until they sit down and write the interpretive text, telling the story first to themselves, and then to their significant others, and then to the public" (p. 502). Throughout my journey in my graduate studies, I have been struggling over these stories, reflecting and changing because of them, sharing and critiquing them, for the larger purpose of improving my practice and the smaller purpose of creating this text. I can claim that in involving these others in my journey, I have been able to create a text that chronicles my educational development, both for my Self and for the larger educational community.
Why Bother?

I committed to this journey because I felt a need to improve my practice. I am working on influencing my own practice in order to benefit my Self as a teacher, and also my students. "Action researchers show the process of the growth of their own understanding, and how that then has a potential beneficial influence in the lives of others" (McNiff, 2000, 204). So my challenge is to chronicle my own learning and growth for the potential benefits of others, to improve the social lives we are all living.

I am not seeking this change within a vacuum of my own needs. In chronicling this journey, I believe that I have clearly expressed my understandings and change so that others may learn from me. In addressing this issue of generality, I again turn to the work of Jack Whitehead (1989). He writes:

The theory is constituted by the practitioners' public descriptions and explanations of their own practice. The theory is located not solely within these accounts but in the relationship between the accounts and the practice. It is this relationship which constitutes the descriptions and explanations as a living form of theory. In being generated from the practices of individuals it has the capacity to relate directly to those practices. To the extent that the values underpinning the practices, the dialogues of question and answer and the systematic form of action/reflection cycle, are shared assumptions within this research community, then we are constructing an educational theory with some potential for generalisability. (p. 47)

In creating an educational theory concerning the improvement of my own practice then, other researchers/reflectioners can, if they share the same assumptions I do that ground my text, build upon their own understandings through my work. This is why I bother.
Yet the practical question still looms: How do I enact an Action Reflection practice?

**How Is Action Reflection Done?**

Action Reflection can take many varied forms, always adapting to the needs of the practitioner and situation. However, McNiff presents an outline that I follow, for the most part, and I include a brief discussion of each of the following:

- What is my research interest?
- Why am I interested?
- What kind of evidence will I gather to show why I am interested?
- What can I do about it?
- What will I do about it?
- What kind of evidence will I gather to show that what I am doing is having an influence?
- How will I explain that influence?
- How will I ensure that any judgements I might make are reasonably fair and accurate?
- What will I do then? (McNiff, 2000, p. 206)

As this is a cyclical process, I returned to different "steps" at different times, often out of sequence, always depending upon my needs as a researcher/reflectioner at that moment. I treat this cyclical process as an outline, prompts to further me along in my journey. As with most of my learning in this journey, I found learning occurring once I stepped outside of the framework and made it personally relevant to my Self.
**What is my research interest?**

Simply put, I am interested in improving my practice. Through the course of my Action Reflection study, I work to develop an instructional methodology that utilizes critical literacy, to challenge and disrupt my own position and voice within my classroom.

**Why am I interested?**

I feel that it is important that children be taught how to think critically about the texts that surround them, including my own practice. To critically challenge is a skill that is crucial in order for people to interact intelligently within the constructions of the social worlds that they live in. My students, I believe, need to see me as a social construction of my experiences, and they need to challenge my Self as the teacher, in the same way that they would any other text. In that I feel it is important for children to be aware of the manipulation and assumptions embedded within texts, they need to recognize that my teaching contains these manipulations and assumptions as well. I feel that as a teacher, I need to admit these, bring these out into the open, to “render visible the visible” (Bersianik as cited in Lewis, 1996, p. 40) within my practice.

In order to do this, I need to challenge my own teaching, upset my own assumptions, and become more aware of my Self within my practice. I need to understand why I teach the way I do, challenge what I have done. In order to become a better teacher, I need to understand my Self as a teacher. These are
pretty big aspirations, yet they are reflections of my personal values and beliefs. I feel strongly about this issue-otherwise, I wouldn't have undertaken this Self-study.

What kind of evidence will I gather?

I claim that this Self-study is text; that is, to paraphrase Norman Denzin (1994), an attempt at making sense of what has been learned-what he calls the art of interpretation: “to translate what has been learned into a body of textual work that communicates these understandings to the reader” (p. 500). My Self-study is taking what I have learned from my experiences, my field texts, and constructing a text that communicates my learning to readers.

In doing action research, you are hoping to find ways to improve things. How can you show things as they are, in the ‘now’ scenario, so that you can then show how they change? ... Data is not evidence. Data is the initial information, which shows the situation as it is. It is important to identify criteria, which will act as clear indicators about how the situation might be judged to have improved through action. (McNiff, 2000, 207)
a document (this text), I have presented for public critique a text of my educational development. Denzin (1994) claims: "Field workers can neither make sense of nor understand what has been learned until they sit down and write the interpretive text, telling the story first to themselves and then to their significant others, and then to the public" (p. 503). My understandings gained concerning my educational development came at the time of writing of the evidence within this text, in preparing it for public consumption.

The data I collected came from many different sources: my journal, personal memory, informal conversations, teaching moments, reflections, and professional experiences. Creating evidence from these data came through interpretation: writing narratives, re-creating those experiences and drawing understandings and new meanings from them. Denzin (1994) writes:

Interpretation is a productive process that sets forth the multiple meanings of an event, object, experience or text. Interpretation is transformative. It illuminates, throws light on experience. It brings out, and refines, as when butter is clarified, then meanings that can be sifted from a text, an object, or a slice of experience. (p. 504)

In following the Action Reflection cycle, I use these meanings, these understandings of experience, taken from my chosen sources, to positively effect my practice, thereby improving it.

**What will I do about it?**

I use these new experiences in interpreting, reflecting, and refining my practice. In re-creating these experiences in narrative form, I come to know my practice in a more complete way. In understanding what I am doing, but more important, **WHY** I am doing it, I can then change the way I speak, act, write, and
think about my practice. It is through the evidence that I gather and "analyze" that I am able to more fully understand my practice.

I had previously attempted critical literacy lessons in isolation, as part of a media studies unit, which I discuss later in my narrative "Barbie for Boys." For these lessons, I followed Allan Luke's (2000) Four Resources Model of critical literacy. I practiced these resources in isolation, treating them as a separate skill to be mastered, divorced from any meaningful context. My own growth came when I turned this gaze inward. For my personal development and growth in this journey, I turned Allan Luke's Four Resources Model inward and applied it to my own practice, specifically my constructions of instruction within my teaching. I centred my teaching on an inquiry that invites my students to participate more fully in my instruction. In revealing the construction of my instruction, I became more aware of the voices and differing views within my room. In this way, I created a framework that allowed me to constantly reflect: challenging and changing my practice.

**How can I show that I had an influence?**

This text is a testament to the learning that occurred, the understandings and new values put into practice. In reflecting upon my practice, I positively influenced my Self in challenging WHY I was doing what I was doing. I chronicle these challenges of my reflections in my narratives, showing how I came to understand my teaching in a critical way.

It is through the writing and constructing of this text that I share my journey in improving my practice. Laurel Richardson claims,

You are monitoring your practice as you go, gathering data about what you are doing, and how it seems to be influencing others. You need to turn the data into evidence as an ongoing process. You need to show how an earlier scenario transforms into a later one, and how the later scenario then changes again, and so on; it is an ongoing transformative process. (McNiff, 2000, p. 208)
I consider writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic.... Writing is also a way of "knowing" – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable. (1994, p. 516)

In writing, then, I came to better know my Self in this Self-study, and how I came to change that Self in my journey of improving my practice.

**How did I explain that influence?**

The point of this inquiry is to communicate that a change had occurred in my practice because of what I did. I need to communicate this change to others in a way that makes sense. Therefore, I write about how I reflected upon, then changed, my teaching in order to reflect a critical literacy model of instruction. I detail how I have changed my talk, my instruction, and my position in creating a more inclusive learning environment. I explain my influence from the personal referent “I,” claiming to develop my own educational knowledge, my own living educational theory. Put quite simply, I explain my influence through my stories of my experience.

This is not a cause-and-effect relationship. You are not saying, "These changes are happening because I did such and such." You are saying, "I can show that certain changes took place as I changed my practice, particularly in myself, and different relationships evolved." (McNiff, 2000, p. 209)
Are my judgements reasonably fair and accurate?

Whether my judgements are fair and accurate is determined upon the story in which they are crafted, as it is through this re-collection that understandings are reached. In that I am sharing my personal stories with a reader, I need to be clear in my communication so that a similar understanding with respect to my claims can be reached. In creating my experiences in storied form, I am attempting to reach a common shared experience. As Denzin (1994) writes: "Authentic understanding is created when readers are able to live their way into an experience that has been described and interpreted" (p. 506). In crafting my judgements for the consumption of others, I need to ensure that others may reach the same judgments. In this way, I ensure that they are accurate and fair.

What will I do then?

I continue to critically analyze my teaching, my instruction, my interactions with my students, in this cyclical, self-reflective way. I continue to reveal the text that is my teaching, and treat it as one voice, and only one voice among many. In this way I continue this journey and will continue doing so long after the publication of this text.

What Now?

In this discussion of my methodology of choice, I have talked about how I am going to conduct my research. Now, I must move my discussion to what I am going
to be doing: critical literacy. I will be using critical literacy as a means to critique my practice. In the following chapter I expand upon the principles and theories of critical literacy that I have touched upon previously. I develop these theories of critical literacy into a living form of theory for myself that will contribute greatly in my attempts at improving my practice.
Chapter Four: Critical Literacy Within My Practice

In this chapter I engage and theorize new teaching possibilities and practical instructional applications presented through a lens of critical literacy. I discuss the aspects of critique based on the work of various scholars and then develop a personal definition and procedure that suits my needs as a teacher wishing to improve my practice. This text is fore-grounded as a process: something to further along my personal teaching practices, but by no means an end product.

The Invitation to Begin

I closed the book. I paused a moment, enjoying the suspense. The little grade 1s looked back at me, anticipating my next question, for we were treading on familiar ground. "Who liked this book?" Their hands shot up, then down, then up again, like a manic carnival game. There were the inevitable conversations, whispers back and forth concerning a hand that should be raised or not, with friends eager to vote together, commands being issued as to raise or not. One by one, they turned back to me, the signal that I could begin tallying up the day’s count.

When the voting was complete, the number was almost identical to the other books previously read. I studiously added the book title to our author’s list, indicating the tally count on the chart. As always, some cheered, and some groaned, claiming that their true favourite already on the list was still winning or losing. Some of the more astute children pointed out the "winners", which books were still tied, and which was the least popular so far.

I couldn't shake my discomfort with the whole process that I had created. This book, nearing the end of our Author Study, was of less quality than the previous books read. Its illustrations were far below the standard that the author had set with his more recent stories. The story line was weak, with no opportunity for group join-in that we all immensely enjoyed, our choral shouts echoing down the hall. Yet, still the children were more concerned with who else liked the books, their choices seeming random and loosely
Whether critics like it or not, society has become a global plurality of competing subcultures and movements where no one ideology and episteme dominates.

(Slattery, 1995, p. 17)

I believe I need to teach my students how to interact intelligently with the world at large. The world of tomorrow may, like the world of today, contain many views, many versions of reality, and many differing and competing meanings. I must prepare my students to un/re/dis-cover these meanings for themselves.

To do this, I need to treat my own practice as containing such meanings, and treat it as only one voice among many. I need to re-evaluate my role as their teacher, to re-visions a role that is more inclusive of the many voices within my room. My students need to see my practice (my teaching and my management techniques) as yet another text, which they must critique and disrupt. Therefore, this journey is about the move from critical literacy-as-skill to critical literacy-as-instructional-strategy. Yet the question still remains: What is critical literacy?

Children as Critical Consumers

Upon reflection, I realize that the discomfort that I felt, that teaching moment that provided this invitation to begin this journey, came from an emerging understanding that I wasn't teaching enough. I did not practice, as Henry Giroux names it, a critical pedagogy

The development of a critical pedagogy is dialectical. Thus, while these theoretical developments are very important and useful for anyone involved in the schooling process they are nonetheless incomplete. We must build upon the foundation they have provided in order to transcend their limitations. (Kretovics, 1985, p. 59)
(1987). He defines critical pedagogy, based upon the work of Donald Graves, as such: making learning meaningful in order to make it critical and to make it critical in order to make it emancipatory, containing both the language of critique and possibility. The challenge for me is to bring these theories into practice. From here, then, I turn to the concept of intermediality to provide a frame for my discussion.

**Intermediality: A Framework of Critical Literacy**

Watts Pailliotet, Ladislaus, Rodenberg, Giles, & Macaul (2000) discuss the topic of intermediality in their article "Intermediality: Bridge to critical media literacy":

"Realizing that educational terms are sometimes shifting, impractical, or exclusionary, we define intermediality broadly as the ability to 'critically read and write with and across varied symbol systems'" (Semali & Watts Pailliotet, 1999, in Watts Pailliotet et al., 2000, p. 208). I use this concept of intermediality in my thesis to synthesize my own ideas on how to improve my practice.

In order to flesh out my discussion, I need to fully explore the concept of intermediality, for I believe it holds many possibilities. Intermediality, above all, is critical media literacy (Watts Pailliotet et al.). There are seven guiding elements to intermediality: **theory, texts, purposes/outcomes, processes, contexts, curriculum, and participants**. It is from this perspective, utilizing this framework, that I will tease out, tentatively apply, and reflect upon the ideas of critical literacy within my teaching practice. I will then use these ideas of critical literacy to construct a way to challenge and thereby improve my practice.

I don't see these seven aspects of Intermediality as steps to follow or hoops to jump through in order to think. However, as an educator, I like the idea that there are these aspects that require attention, and this focus can ultimately assist in
becoming critically literate. These headings can be entry points into a more rich discussion.

**Theory**

Critical literacy is continually difficult to define. There are many different perspectives from which to approach it, such as from a cultural studies perspective, a postmodern perspective, or from a feminist pedagogy perspective (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). Each of these perspectives provides radically different agendas, none that speak directly to me. However, I have found what I have been searching for within intermediality. "Intermediality assumes a synthetic view of literacy teaching and learning" (Watts Pailliotet et al., 2000, p. 209). In using “synthetic”, I take liberties here and slant this discussion with the idea of “synthesis”.

I take this idea further and claim permission to integrate the work of different scholars that have supported my own personal teaching philosophy with regards to a critical literacy, all under the guidance of theory under the title **Intermediality**.

I feel that my role as a teacher is no longer to teach reading and writing, but, to paraphrase Allan Luke (2000), I should be teaching texts and discourses. I do not wish to be the sole provider of information, with my rhetoric being valued over that of the others within my classroom. However, that is what I have done in placing my Self at the centre of the room. My students are constantly surrounded by texts, information, manipulation-I am not the only source that they engage with. They need be prepared to deal with these sources independently. For this independence to occur, I need to teach in a way that invites challenge and critique. I need to teach in
a way that encourages dialogue, that reveals the construction of my practice. To me, then, critical literacy is interacting and engaging with texts and discourses.

**Texts**

Texts surround us—they are anything that contain meaning, whether explicit or subtle, and can be viewed by anyone. However, different people have different interpretations about what meanings are contained within any given text. Wells and Chang Wells (1992) define texts as

Any artefact that is constructed as a representation of meaning using a conventional symbolic system. For, by virtue of its permanence and the symbolic mode in which it is created, any such artefact performs the essential function of allowing us to create an external, fixed representation of the sense we make of our experience so that we may reflect upon and manipulate it. (p. 145)

This definition broadens the spectrum considerably. However, the issue for me is how do I teach a critical discourse that can be automatically applied to these “representation[s] of meaning[s]?" (Wells & Chang Wells, p. 145) My challenge lies in the fact that my students are just learning the symbol systems of certain texts in their early attempts at literacy. Into this mix I bring my own practice, as yet another symbol system for them to interpret.

I consider my practice as a text because of the assumptions that I rely upon that guide the way I teach. My practice is a text because, contained therein, are

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Discourses and texts are forms of capital for exchange in [the New Times] economies. Who gets access to them, who can manipulate and construct them, who can critique, refute, second guess them are the key educational issues of the next century. (Luke, 2000, p. 449)

Texts are not ‘objective’ and value neutral, but are constructive artefacts that convey shifting meanings, reflect cultural ideologies, and have powerful impacts on our worldviews and behaviours. (Watts Pailliotet et al., 2000, p. 210)
values and beliefs that I hold concerning how children learn, what a learning environment looks like, how I interact with students, and so on. My practice is a text because it contains symbols containing meanings that others (my students) must read in order to function successfully within my room. Revealing my practice as a text is how I am working to improve my practice.

**Processes**

Allan Luke (2000) discusses a Four Resources Model crucial to the practice of critical literacy. He suggests four practices: Coding Practices, Text-Meaning Practices, Pragmatic Practices, and Critical Practices. The following is a list of these 4 Practices, with the accompanying guiding questions:

**Coding practices: Developing resources as a code breaker**

How do I crack this text? How does it work? What are its patterns and conventions? How do the sounds and the marks relate, singly and in combinations?

**Text-meaning practices: Developing resources as a text participant**

How do the ideas represented in the text string together? What cultural resources can be brought to bear on the text? What are the cultural meanings and possible readings that can be constructed from this text?

**Pragmatic practices: Developing resources as text user**

How do the uses of this text shape its composition? What do I do with this text, here and now? What will others do with it? What are my options and alternatives?
Critical practices: Developing resources as text analyst and critic

What kind of person, with what interests and values, could both write and read this naively and unproblematically? What is this text trying to do to me? In whose interests? Which positions, voices, and interests are at play? Which are silent and absent? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

In following Luke's (2000) model, there are different aspects of a text that a critically literate reader needs to be aware of. Readers need to engage in texts with these aspects in mind. My journey has been about taking this process of critique and turning it inward to facilitate my reflection on how to improve my practice. In focussing on these different aspects, these different resources, I have been forced to more fully appreciate my practice within the framework of what I am doing to my students. In centring these resources within the foreground of my practice, my students, together with my Self, can be code breakers, text participants, text users, and textual critics of my practice.

I am attracted to this model of Luke's (2000) because of the guiding questions embedded in each process. I feel that these questions lead the reader away from an analysis perspective towards an inquiry model. These questions invite the reader into the text, and in my case, into my practice. I use these questions to guide my inquiry into my practice, effectively revealing the construction and hidden intentions embedded in what I am doing to my students. This four process model helps move my practice from an approach of doing things to my students to doing things with my students.
Hence the central problem of an education based on experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences. (Dewey, 1963, pp. 27-8)

Contexts

I need to place personal experience in a place of prominence within my teaching practice. As Dewey claims, "amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (Dewey, 1963, p. 25). Experience is what learning hinges upon. Experience, as well, is what my teaching hinges upon. I teach from my own experiences, my living educational theories. I teach in response to what I believe and what I think. This journey has been a turning inward to un/re/dis/cover the experiences and assumptions that guide my teaching, and reveal them to my Self. In so doing, I work to reveal the text that is my practice.

As well as my own personal experiences, I need to consider the experiences of my students, which they are using to build meanings from within my classroom. In learning to "read" my practice, they are constructing meanings from my teaching. "Intermediality assumes that social contexts as well as literacy processes, are connected" (Watts Pailliotet et al., 2000, p. 213). I need to create and support a learning environment that tolerates and offers discussion about different worldviews, different cultural perspectives, in an honest and positive way, rather than only using my own dominant voice. Challenging my own voice and presenting this possibility to my students creates more space for us to share our many and varied voices.
Participants

Wells and Chang Wells (1992) claim:
“Becoming literate is best seen in terms of an apprenticeship in which the learner is inducted into the model of literacy implicitly held by the more expert performer” (p. 147).

It is how I am currently inducting students that I need to re-evaluate, and I believe I can do this through critical literacy. In challenging my role as Teacher, I am participating in the critiquing process, inviting my students to do the same. By removing the pedestal that I have placed my Self, my voice upon, I hope that, together, my students and my Self can engage in a more equal discourse about the text that is my practice. This is a crucial shift for me, as previously I viewed teaching with a delivering and receiving metaphor. However, if we are to participate together in the meaning-making process, then my practice needs to be open for critique, like any other text.

Curriculum

I see critical literacy as an over-arching learning strategy. I have applied this to my own teaching as a way to free my Self from the assumptions that have guided my practice. However, as an educator, I am still responsible for the instruction of Ontario Curriculum. When pressed, I can link it directly to the Oral Language component of Language: “By the end of Grade One, students will: view, read, and listen to media works with simple messages or factual information and describe what they have learned” (Ministry of Education, 1997). As with all curriculum expectations, educators are able to take liberties. I claim the direct instruction of
critical literacy as a method of reaching this expectation, yet know that it is so much more.

I prefer to re-conceptualize curriculum in the words of Henry Giroux (1987): “In short, curriculum must be understood as a form of cultural politics that embodies the basic elements of a critical pedagogy that is both empowering and transformative” (p. 178). This definition is far from a series of expectations that must be met in the course of about 190 teaching days. In broadening my perception, my understanding of curriculum, and what it means to teach, I lay a personal claim here: I need to teach in a critical way to change the way I think, I write, and I speak with the others in my room. I need to empower the voices of my students by challenging what I am doing, asking WHY I am doing what I am doing, and inviting my students into this process.

**Purpose/Outcomes**

Why am I doing this? Referring back to my narrative “The Invitation to Begin,” I had originally wanted my students to speak in an intelligent and literate way about the texts that I was presenting to them. Now I want so much more, especially from my Self. Watts Pailliotet et al. (2000) say, “Intermediality is about transformation” (p. 217). They also claim that the logical extension of being critically literate is action based on the recognitions that arise. Action for me means to teach in a better way. Action for me is becoming more aware of my practice and the assumptions that guide it. Action for me is teaching in a way that reveals the construction of my practice, inviting my students to challenge and critique it. Action for me means becoming a better teacher.
Chapter Five: Positioning My Practice

Through the work with critical literacy, I have arrived at a praxis/crisis point: In reflecting upon my position within the classroom, I realized that while I am struggling to disrupt the textual influences that affect my students daily, I am doing nothing to disrupt my own practice-as-cultural (re)production.

When I began my journey, I approached critical literacy as a separate task, like how phonics can be studied in isolation from other aspects of language. I took my cue from many different authors and researchers whose concern was the instruction of critical literacy. I took from these scholars methods to instruct critical literacy, yet ignored the possibility of teaching in a critical way.

I feel it is important to outline my position in this way so that readers may more fully understand the paths that my journey has taken. When looking for strategies for teaching critical literacy, I immediately gravitated to key words, buzz phrases, and steps to follow. Marilyn Wilson (1988), author of “Critical Thinking: Repackaging or Revolution,” says:

In its most basic form, critical literacy/thinking suggests the need for learners to do more with texts than simply soak up bits and pieces of information. It advocates the use of strategies and techniques for helping learners think critically: such as predicting outcomes... formulating questions... responding to statements.... (pp. 544-545)

She continues with the list of possibilities, something that I was initially drawn to. Again, as an educator, I was attracted to the steps, the easy-to-follow lesson plans, the virtual black-line masters.

Even in the work of Allan Luke (2000), I gravitated to his Four Resources Model because it was easy to enact. I was guilty of designing lesson plans around his questions, leading an inquiry around this procedure. However, as I have
continued along this learning journey, I have begun an awakening. I have begun to turn the principles of Luke's critical literacy inward to my own practice—and asking these questions of my Self.

If teachers are not critically conscious, if they are not awake to their own values and commitments (and to the conditions working upon them), if they are not personally engaged with their subject matter and with the world around, I do not see how they can initiate the young into critical questioning or the moral life. (Greene, 1978, p. 48)

**Barbie For Boys**

I closed the ad that we were looking at, and turned to look at my students. Their eager faces looked back at me, reflecting an anticipation of what was coming up next. We had been at this for a few weeks now, and they were excited about what was coming: most likely some newspaper flyers from a well-loved establishment, Wal-Mart and Toys R Us having already made appearances. It was nearing Christmas time, and wish lists were getting long.

I launched into my rehearsed lesson. They were to find a partner, take a Barbie ad ("Oh man!" was heard from a few) and change it so that boys would buy it. Stunned silence. Then the rumble of excitement came as ideas started to appear, bubbling up as they began to seriously consider the task.

I paused before handing out the flyers and worksheets, the signal to gather their materials and begin. Did they understand the point of doing this? I hadn't admitted this to them. I had hinted at the beginning of this unit that Wal-Mart and its corporate partners were trying to get consumers to do things, and they were doing this through advertisements. However, I had not as yet, let them in on my struggle to access the cultural assumptions surrounding gender and the gendering of toys. Why had I not included their voices? Why were my students still not part of this process? Why had I not included a space for us to discuss what I was trying to do to them? I had not, as yet, let go of my distanced role as the teacher/authority.

I struggled to shake off my discomfort and pushed on through the day's lesson.
In re-membering this experience, I see the beginning of my shift in perspective, turning my gaze inwards to challenge my own practice. Turning back to Wilson (1988), I see that I had missed the point of teaching critical literacy. She claims:

Teaching critical reading/thinking is more than selecting the right textbook or developing a more creative set of lesson plans. It needs to start with a reorientation to our students and to the subject we teach. It forces us to look critically at our own roles as teachers and at the nature of the learning that goes on in our classrooms. (p. 544)

This has been the most dramatic change in my journey: a true reflection on what I am doing to my children, and asking the question WHY? In looking at how I am teaching, I am creating a living educational theory (Whitehead, 1989) of my practice, and seeking ways to improve it.

My teaching is a text. I need to disrupt the assumptions that guide my teaching and silence my students. Giroux (1987) writes:

It is also crucial for teachers to understand how schools, as part of the wider dominant culture, often function to marginalize, disconfirm, and delegitimize the experiences, histories, and categories that students use in mediating their lives. This means understanding how texts, classroom relations, teacher talk, and other aspects of the formal and hidden curricula of schooling often function to actively silence students. (p. 177)

On my journey, I have changed my perspective on critical literacy. In turning critical literacy inward, I can begin to change the way that I teach, re-position my place within my classroom, to share my voice with the other voices in my room, and teach in a more critical way. In the following section, I begin to develop a personal critical pedagogy, based upon my work with critical literacy.
Chapter Six: Re-Positioning My Practice

Throughout my days teaching, while on this learning journey, I've been learning to listen to my Self teaching. I'm learning how to step outside of my discourse and become aware of how I might be contributing to the learning that is occurring, the constructions of meanings that are happening when reading my text/practice. I am always trying to be more aware of what I am doing to my students. I am learning to foster an awareness of my voice and learning to challenge this voice with my students by questioning the once-hidden reasons that support what I am doing.

A Word About Being Right

Previously, I have discussed some of the discomfort I felt during my critical thinking unit on advertising in the media. This initial foray into the world of early primary critical thinking has proven to be fertile ground for some fundamental changes in my practice. There was a moment of enlightenment, a moment of awareness, that served as a step towards my “render[ing] visible the visible” (Bersianik as cited in Lewis, 1996, pg. 40) within my practice.

The following in an excerpt from my field notes, made during my “Barbie for Boys” inquiry:

Observations

How does this text work?

I asked this question, referring to the Toys 'R Us ad that we were examining. I copied these onto the chart paper.

- Using numbers and words
- Things that you like
- Look at numbers to buy
• Using colours (boys and girls)

It was at this point that I used the word "deconstruct." I said, "Let's deconstruct this text—that means take it apart to see how it works." I held up a Barbie ad and asked who is this for? Majority answered for girls, with snickers and "gross" being heard from some students. I said, "I don't believe in there being girls' toys and boys' toys, but some people do. What colours has Toys R Us used to show you that this is for girls?" Students indicated pink and purple. I asked, "If this were an ad for boys, what colours do you think Toys R Us would use?" Answers were blue, white, and black.

Reflections/Interpretations

I really enjoyed being able to drop the word "deconstruct" during the lesson—I enjoy using the words, and not to "dumb" down the vocabulary for the children. This may be a good possibility for the future—when looking at how texts work. We could deconstruct them to get at assumptions that we may not be aware of.

I also need to be constantly aware of my role here—I am teaching texts and discourses, and I am not a text expert, but a participant like my children. I feel I need to get away from my teacher-approval mode that I find my Self in. In response to some of their answers, I replied "Right!," implying that there are wrong answers to our inquiry. I am quite uncomfortable with this possibility. (Personal Field Notes, Nov. 6, 2002)

During this unit, I began to listen and try to be a participant in the meaning-making process. I began to listen to how I speak to my students. I was getting to a place where I could admit my voice to my students and displace my Self from the
distanced role that I had created. A crucial dis-placing moment came during the next
critical literacy lesson:

**Reflections/Interpretations**

Somewhere in the lesson, I caught my Self saying “right” to my
students-I stopped there, and admitted to them that I need to stop saying
that, because by saying that I was right, then there was also a wrong answer
to our inquiry. There isn’t a right or a wrong answer, and I am learning too.
One of my students said, “But you are the adult!” I called him on this
comment and asked him what he meant. He was unwilling (unable?) to
articulate his comment. I said that just because I was an adult I don’t
necessarily know more than him. I know a lot of stuff, but not everything. I
knew that he played hockey, so I told him that he probably knew more about
hockey than I did because he played it and was good at it. He seemed
uncomfortable with the discussion-perhaps I was putting him on the spot?
(Personal Field Notes, Nov. 8, 2002)

This critical moment was the beginning of my dis-placement. I began to see how my
position in that class had not been questioned and that this needed to change.
When I was saying that students were right, I was passing judgement on their
opinions, their voices. I was supporting those who could guess what I wanted to
hear, what I thought was right, and silencing the voices that I didn’t agree with.
Saying “right” and “wrong” can be very powerful. I began to listen to the questions
that I was asking and responding in ways that would encourage conversation. I
began listening to how I asked questions and became aware of the “guess what I am
thinking” instructional method that I have used in the past. In teaching with the
answers in mind, I have tended to not listen to answers that I wasn't expecting.

From this moment, I made an effort to respond in different ways:

- That's true, what else?
- Okay, I see what you are saying.
- Good, I see how that makes sense!
- Um, I'm not sure about that. Can you explain that again?

I am trying to engage in a dialogue with my students and talk in a way that encourages conversation rather than stifling it. I need to explore my impact on my students, their voices, their knowing. I need to treat my practice as a text that can be examined, questioned, challenged. I need to really look at how I am speaking to my class. I need to start showing my students that I, too, am a text participant and that I, too, am constructing meaning from my experiences. As well, I need to admit that I teach in a way that reflects my experiences, and these may not be in everyone's best interests.

**What Pecola Taught Me**

I have taught grade 1 for 4 years now, and I am always learning from my greatest teachers: my students. I consider this a sentimental cliché, yet am always brought to attention on this position, being called to bear witness to what my students reveal. This year, there is a little girl in my class who, in her own way, is doing more to upset my own unquestioned assumptions than I have been able to do since I began my teaching journey all those years ago.

This little girl in my grade 1 class is an interesting person. She is quite popular, I feel, and has many different friends to share her attention with. She is a gifted artist and is able to render scenes with accurate and amazing detail,
impressing her classmates and my Self with her skill. She is always enthusiastic about learning.

I had a student-teacher at the beginning of this year, and together with the other grade 1 teacher, we would often play the game of "What Are They Going To Do When They Get Older." We look at our students, and based upon their presented personalities, we try to predict future occupations for our students. We've kept ourselves amused for hours, projecting our students into administrative assistant roles, frazzled and frayed with approaching deadlines, or famous rock stars, expanding upon their current repertoire of dance moves to perform in the pop arena of the future. My student-teacher felt that, because of this little girl's enthusiasm and boundless energy, she would be a perfect infomercial audience member, cheering on with gusto the many amazing features of the latest gizmos, loudly cheering the low-low special one-time-only price, available only for the next 30 minutes. I love teaching her, because I play into this, wildly exaggerating my teaching performances, and she encourages me through her excessively positive responses. Needless to say, we have a great teacher-learner relationship.

Though she encourages my performative nature, she also has taught me a lot about my own practice. For the following narrative account of this critical moment, I will refer to her as Pecola, alluding to the main character in Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize winning book, *The Bluest Eye* (1994).

*I stood before both classes, the other grade 1 class being there, as both Science and Social Studies are taught to both classes simultaneously as part of our team-teaching arrangement. I had everyone's attention, in that I had 45 little faces looking up at me. I began.*

"Okay, today we are going to do something very hard!" I started.

"Uh-oh!" I heard Pecola say to her friends seated around her.

"In fact, it will be so hard, most of you will cry!"
“No we won’t!” Pecola loudly assured me.

"'Boo-hoo-hoo!' you’ll say, ‘this is too hard Mr. McClenaghan!’” I teased.

“No we won’t!” she shouted.

Though I was teaching to the whole group, I often engaged in these conversations with Pecola, waxing melodramatic, stringing her along every step of the way. This is the fun I have in my job.

“Okay, well – you asked for it!” and I began the lesson.

Over the past few days, we had been talking about events and putting them in order to meet the grade expectation of time lines. I began today’s lesson by dividing the board into three sections, with the titles Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. I asked the group to choral read the words to make sure that everyone was prepared to proceed.

“What did you do yesterday?” I asked the group, and immediately an army of hands flew up. I chose various students to share their experiences and wrote them down under the title of Yesterday. I repeated the process with Today and Tomorrow. When the board was full of possibilities, I capped my dry-erase marker, held up a single white sheet of paper, and faced the crowd. I paused unnecessarily, enjoying the suspense, and waiting until I had everyone’s undivided attention.

“This is what we are going to do today. We are going to make a book about what you did yesterday, today, and are going to do tomorrow. Each of you will get a sheet of paper. I want you to hold it like this,” I held it up length-wise, “and then fold it in half, like a hamburger.” A few of them still giggled over this demonstration, but this was January, and this was familiar lingo. A “hamburger” fold makes fat pieces of paper, the opposite being a “hotdog” fold, creating skinny pieces of paper.

“On the front cover,” I continued, showing my empty folded piece of paper, now resembling a book. “you are going to write the title, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. As with all of your title pages, I want you to include a gorgeous illustration. Because we are talking about you, I want you to draw a… dinosaur! I paused, to see if they were following.

“No! We have to draw ourselves!” a few of them chimed out.
“Good! You need to draw yourself! Now, on the first page,” I said as I opened the book, “You will write the sentence, ‘Yesterday I...’, and you need to finish this sentence with whatever you did yesterday.” I pointed to the board, to cue some of the ideas that we had just talked about. “On the next page, you will write ‘Today, I...’ blah blah blah, writing down whatever you did today. Now, what are you going to write on the last page?” I asked, unnecessarily dramatic, as I closed the book to the back cover.

“Tomorrow I will!” one astute student responded, when called upon.

“Yes! Why do you have to say ‘will’?” I prodded.

“Because you are going to do it tomorrow!” another chosen student answered.

“Good! On the last page, you need to write ‘Tomorrow I will...’ and finish that sentence with whatever you are going to do tomorrow. On each page, under each sentence, you need to draw a picture of whatever you have written about. Any questions about what we are going to do?” Some asked the usual questions: how to get an ‘A’, can we copy off the board, etc. I answered them all, handed out the paper, and sent them to begin.

Pecola tackled this task with the usually gusto, working quickly (if a little loudly), and eagerly telling her friends what she would be writing and drawing about. She had all her materials in front of her, and if she was missing anything, she quickly networked with her friends to supply her with the missing colour, extra eraser, etc. She was visibly excited to document her experience, as this was Monday, and she had enjoyed a very exciting weekend. At the beginning of that day she had made a point of showing me her “Weekend Journal”, telling me enthusiastically of what she had written and drawn. I was certain that that same experience would appear in today’s task.

I surveyed my class working, as the other class had returned to their room to complete their task there, and was satisfied that most of the class was on task. I got the remainder of the students focussed, and then returned to my desk. I used this time to read, one-on-one with my kids, as well as clarifying instructions, sharpening pencils, and controlling the room.

Soon it was time to stop the activity. I stood up from my desk and put my hands on my head. “One! Two! Three! Look at me!” I said, and waited.
Pencils and crayons clattered to the ground as materials were dropped and hands shot up to the tops of heads and bodies turned. In a matter of seconds I had 42 eyes looking at me.

"Thank-you." I said, "Boys and girls, it's time for home! When I say 'go!', you need to tidy up your desk, put your books in the 'Finished Bin', take off your shoes, grab your agenda, check your mail, because it's time for..."

"Home!" they collectively said.

"Put your finger in the air!" 21 fingers rose into the air. "Put your finger on your name." Some found theirs, others wrote down what they had previously forgotten.

"Go!" I said, and everyone was moving. Chairs were placed on desks, work was handed in, agendas were in hand, homework flew out of their mailboxes and the chaotic madness of going home descended upon the room. I chased students around, ensuring that they handed in their work (as some still insisted on putting these activities in their desks, perhaps hoarding them, possibly forgetting the freshly delivered instructions). I honed in on my unfocussed troublemakers, made sure everyone's agenda was claimed, cleared the mailboxes, and emptied the room in a matter of minutes. I oversaw the madness in the hallway, finding owners of forgotten snow pants, threatening to send unclaimed mittens to the lost and found, handing out forgotten lunch bags. Today was a good day, as most of the students were ready as the bell rang. Suddenly the hallway emptied, save for a few stragglers, whom I promptly chased out. I took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and returned to my room. I was done, with nothing left to do except assess the day's work.

I sat at my desk, pulled over the finished bin, and began to mark. I graded the work accordingly, with my mind wandering over the events of the day, reflecting upon my successes and failures. I thought about the behaviour problems that I had encountered during the day, and tried to think of ways of improving the situations. Suddenly, with Pecola's work in front of me, my breath caught, and I stopped.

I am always impressed with Pecola's work. She consistently demonstrates herself capable, independently meeting the various
expectations I present to her (this being teacher lingo meaning she’s an “A” student). Her work is neat and always completed to the best of her ability. However, as I had felt in other times looking at her self-portraits, something was definitely going on, and what it was made me very uncomfortable.

In her book, Pecola wrote, “Yesterday I got my ears perst.” This was her weekend event that had her so excited this morning. She continued in her book by writing, “Today I went to craft clumb.” and “Tomorrow I will go to school.” Her illustrations inside the book show her, happy and in various locations, wearing a bright purple dress, contrasting against her dark skin and her long brown hair pulled tightly into two braids, with bright bobbles taming her many curls. However, it wasn’t these pictures that stopped me cold. On the front cover, Pecola appears, smiling and with arms wide, with a floating red heart and yellow star above her. She is wearing blue pants, brown shoes and a yellow top, matching perfectly her pictured long, straight, blond hair. Her blue eyes smile out from her white face, greeting the reader.

I’ve seen variations of this incarnation of Pecola before, with her sometimes wearing long, pink princess dresses, or flowing, white gowns. She rarely appears dressed this casually, but that isn’t the source of my discomfort. This version of her contrasts so starkly with the versions of her within her book and within my class. This illustration has reinvented her ethnicity, positioning her as another person entirely, and it troubles me deeply.

I cannot begin to guess as to the reasons behind these transformations, and why they randomly appear in her work. I cannot begin to understand her experiences, which contrast with mine so greatly. I cannot imagine a discussion with her about this, the language being completely lost to me. I only know that something is going on here, and I don’t know what it is.

I struggle to shake off my discomfort, and push on through the day’s marking.

The Blondest Hair: Allusions To Improve My Practice

In referring to my student as Pecola, I am attempting an allusion to Toni Morrison’s book, The Bluest Eye (1994). In this book, the character of Pecola,
through her experiences of being marginalized in a society that devalues difference, wishes to eschew her Self, replacing it with one who has blue eyes. The author asks, in her afterword, "Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale" (p. 210)? This is what I asked looking at the pictures produced by my student. I am not naïve enough to believe that I am solely responsible for this artwork, my Pecola having already been living among socializing forces beyond anyone's control for the past 6 years of her life. However, as with all critical points within my practice, I need to turn my gaze inward and look at how my practice is impacting her Self.

I Wish that I Had Duck Feet

I recently acquired a collection of Dr. Seuss books for my personal library, I Wish that I Had Duck Feet (LeSieg, 1965) being included. This is a favourite one of mine, having read it often in my youth. It is about a young boy wishing to have various animal body parts, and all the fun things he could do with these new additions. This book follows a pattern, with the young boy wishing for a part, telling of all the fun things he could do with the new part, and then telling of some potential downfalls. He then wishes for a different part, repeating the pattern. The entire tale is told in a lyrical rhyme, with plenty of opportunity of group join-in, which I am particularly fond of.

As the title suggests, one of the things the young boy wishes for is a pair of duck feet:

I wish
that I had duck feet.
And I can tell you why.
You can splash around in duck feet.
You don't have to keep them dry.
I wish that I had duck feet.
No more shoes!
No shoes for me!
The man down at the shoe store
would not have my size, you see.

If I had two duck feet,
I could laugh at Big Bill Brown.
I would say, "YOU don't have duck feet!
These are all there are in town!"

I think it would be very good
to have them when I play.
Only kids with duck feet on
can ever play this way.

BUT…
My mother would not like them.
She would say, "Get off my floor!"
She would say, "You take your duck feet
and you take them out that door!"

"Don't ever come in here again
with duck feet on, now DON'T."
SO...
I guess I can't have duck feet.
I would like to. But I won't. (pp. 3 – 11)

This unassuming book, which has held my imagination captive for so many
years, has helped me in addressing my uneasiness with Pecola.

Reading Outward: What I Am Doing

As my students came in from recess, I raced them to the carpet, and sat on
my chair. I grabbed a book from my stand-by collection, and held it out for
the assembling group to read. "Who knows the title of this book?" I asked.
Immediately I heard some cheers from the crowd.

"I Wish that I Had Duck Feet!" answered one student, chosen because he
already had his indoor shoes on and was ready on the carpet. I often read
familiar books, repeatedly throughout the year, as a tactic in commanding
everyone's attention. Children listen when there are things to listen to, and in
my experience, nothing captivates a child quicker than a good story. That is
why I keep Duck Feet in my pile, ready whenever necessary.
I opened the book, and began reading as the rest of the class, quickly and quietly, assembled on the carpet. "I wish that I had duck feet, and I can tell you why...", and I was off. I found the rhythm of the lines, rolling over the measured tones, letting the words bounce off my tongue, savouring every morsel. As I was reading, I thought back to my own childhood, and being enraptured at an early age at the possibilities within this book. I remember, when I was young, trying to imagine what deer horns would feel like coming out from my head, and wondering if I could sleep with these new protrusions. On this particular day, I remembered imagining having a long, long tail, and what I would do with it. Then, I turned the page and saw what the young boy was doing with his long, long tail. I stopped short and silently gasped. There it was.

I'm not sure how long I paused, but I remember a terrible sinking feeling in my stomach, and thinking 'Oh my God, this is why..." My students must have picked up on my pause, but no one commented on the fact. Unfortunately, as with most of my critical moments, I pushed it off and finished the book, though my heart was no longer in it, having become heavy with my discontent. I closed the book, and returned it to the bottom of my pile as I started the lesson.

This story leads directly into my next section on using critical literacy within my practice. In order to fully understand the source of my suggested discomfort, I need to apply Luke’s (2000) Four Resources Model inwards to see what I am doing to my students. This critical approach leads me to change the way that I teach and the way that I talk in my room. In challenging my voice, I begin to teach in a more inclusive way.
Chapter Seven: Critical Literacy Within My Teaching

Fortunately for me, I wasn't able to let go of this critical moment, prompted by my reading of I Wish that I Had Duck Feet (LeSieg, 1965). I began to trouble it to find the source of my discomfort. I was able to apply critical literacy as a method in improving my practice, thereby reaching a greater understanding of the assumptions that guide my teaching. In turning Allan Luke's (2000) Four Resources Model of Critical Literacy inwards to my own practice, my own text, I am able to see what I am doing to my students.

Placing I Wish that I Had Duck Feet

In beginning to listen to my own discomfort, my own critical indicator, I began to examine why I used this book. What was appealing for me? Why did this book, which played a prominent role in my childhood, find an equally prominent role in my current practice? What is going on here?

Coding practices: Developing resources as a code breaker

How do I crack this text? How does it work? What are its patterns and conventions? How do the sounds and the marks relate, singly and in combinations? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

It is because of the code used in I Wish that I Had Duck Feet (LeSieg, 1965) that I use it. The letters join together to form words, which are linked together in sentences that contain syllables and rhyme, forming a text pleasing to the ear. The illustrations, simple watercolours in bright fanciful combinations, compliment the story in a pleasing way. The words are not altogether difficult, producing a text both pleasing and accessible to an audience just becoming literate.

Text-meaning practices: Developing resources as a text participant

How do the ideas represented in the text string together? What cultural resources can be brought to bear on the text? What are the cultural meanings
I enjoyed this book immensely in my childhood. To fully appreciate this, I need to tell a little about where I grew up, in order for the reader to gain a greater appreciation of my own cultural resources.

I grew up in a small town in southwestern Ontario, population 3,000. I attended a small Catholic elementary school, where my whiteness was affirmed daily, from Jesus in alabaster on the cross to the faces of my classmates. Racial differences were virtually non-existent, there being nothing and no one to conflict against. Actually, there was a skinhead who attended my high school. My friends and I poked fun at him, claiming that he was very lazy, having nothing to be hateful of within our enclosed community.

As for my elementary schooling experience, it was without the contrast of colour. So of course I enjoyed Duck Feet, it affirming everything in my everyday lived experience. In the text, I could see my Self, without discounting aspects of me in order to be included. My enjoyment came from my own cultural experiences being brought to bear on this text. I read this text using my own personal experiences to construct a Pleasantville (Ross, 1998) experience. In using this in my class, I am assuming that I am re-creating the same experience with my students, assuming that they are sharing the same cultural experiences with me. However, we are living in different times, and I am teaching in a different place.

Pragmatic practices: Developing resources as text user

How do the uses of this text shape its composition? What do I do with this text, here and now? What will others do with it? What are my options and alternatives? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

I Wish that I Had Duck Feet (LeSieg, 1965) is constructed as a story to entertain, a fantasy in which to delight. The language has been chosen in order to be pleasing to
the ear. It was primarily intended, I believe, for a young audience, so it uses simple, easy to decode words. I read this text to entertain, and this is how I use it within my practice. I assume that my students are viewing this text as something to entertain them. I certainly didn’t consider that my students might construct their own meanings from this seemingly benign text. I did not consider the possibilities beyond my control. However, this is a possibility, one that I had not previously considered. This possibility, in all its complexity, is the driving force behind my journey.

**Critical practices: Developing resources as text analyst and critic**

What kind of person, with what interests and values, could both write and read this naively and unproblematically? What is this text trying to do to me?

In whose interests? Which positions, voices, and interests are at play? Which are silent and absent? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

I have already spoken about my own schooling experiences which led me to read this text naively and unproblematically. I used this text to settle and quiet (silence?) my students, as well as entertain, all in my interest. Certainly, it is the dominant voice, the dominant ideology that is at play within this text. This is what I revealed.

**Looking Inward: What Am I Doing?**

Then, as I turned the page and saw what the young boy was doing with his long, long tail, I stopped short and silently gasped. There it was. The young boy was riding his bike, pulling a girl behind him who was holding onto his long, long tail. The boy and girl were obviously enjoying themselves, with wide smiles plainly visible on both of them. On-lookers looked on, some delighting in the spectacle, some of the older ones with a look of dismay at the impertinence. It was with this scene that I arrived at my critical point: All the faces were white.

Throughout the book, the illustrations are seemingly grounded in a 1950s era. I enjoyed the present campiness of it, reading it now to my students. However, as
alluded to with my previous Pleasantville (Ross, 1998) reference, it was an era of many silent voices. If all the faces were white in the book, how was Pecola going to place herself within this text? I enjoyed this book because I saw my face reflected in the illustrations, my experience validated in the pages. I counted as a person because I was represented there. I could be the main character, because I looked like him. Where did this leave the rest of my students who couldn't see themselves in this text?

I used this text for a seemingly benign purpose. If I believed that my students simply consumed this and operated naively within this frame of reference, then I wouldn't be so troubled. However, I do not believe this. I am engaged in a meaning-making process with my students. I am delivering texts to them through my instructional practices, yet I am not in control of the meanings that they construct, based upon their own personal experiences, from these texts. If untroubled, my assumptions are left unchecked within this construction process. Therefore, I need to bring these to the foreground, and "render visible the visible" (Bersianik as cited in Lewis, 1996, p. 40).

Rendering Visible the Visible

After this critical moment, I placed *Duck Feet* on the bottom of the pile and didn't use it for a while. However, my grade 1 partner and I, in a last-minute planning session, decided to use this text in a writing lesson. We wanted the kids to imagine an animal body part for themselves, and, following the pattern in the Dr. Seuss book, write about some good things that would come out of this experience, and some bad things. I agreed to the lesson, having somewhat successfully buried my discomfort in the time that had passed, and prepared myself to teach writing.
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Displacing I Wish that I Had Duck Feet

The children gathered on the carpet after the lunchtime recess, choosing their spots in direct relation to me, putting on shoes and unwinding after the 40 minutes of uninterrupted free time. I sat in my chair and presented the book for their viewing. This time, I thought I heard a few groans, with one “Not again!” coming from the back. I wondered if I heard this today because it was a reflection of what I was feeling.

I launched into my lesson.

Coding Practices: Developing resources as a code-breaker

“Today, I am going to read this book, and I want you to pay attention to what is happening in this story. I want you to listen to the words, and look at the pictures in this story.” A few of them perked up, becoming aware of an approaching challenge. Pecola was one of them, and I made an effort to keep an eye on her.

Text-meaning practices: Developing resources as a text participant

“The boy in this story keeps wishing for animal parts, and then tells us what he would do with them. When he wishes for duck feet, what does he say he can do with them?”

“He can play in the water!” one student answered.

“Good,” I responded, “Anything else?”

“He doesn’t need shoes anymore!” another stated.

“Yes!” I said.

Pragmatic practices: Developing resources as a text user

“We are going to do some writing with this story. I want you to follow the pattern that Dr. Seuss uses in this story.” I stole a quick look at Pecola to make sure she was with me, and she was.

I started the story, and soon found comfort in the familiar rhythm and rhyme. I found myself being drawn into my old pattern of longing, remembering my own experiences long ago with this text. Before I knew it, I was reading that page, that site of my critical moment. My discomfort sharply rose again, having escaped its place of banishment. I paused. What should I do?
Critical practices: Developing resources as text analyst and critic

I finished reading the story and closed the book.

"Now," I said, turning all my attention upon them, "I really like this book. I used to read it all the time when I was your age. But lately, I've been looking at this book closely, and there is something in here that has been bothering me." I held the book out in front of them. "I wonder: do you know what I am talking about? Let's look at the illustrations."

I opened the book, starting with the page that started this all. I held it open for a long time, and wondered what they would come up with.

"I think the people in the book are really mad at him for riding his bike." One student offered.

"Yes, that could be it." I said, wary of responding in a way that would shut down the inquiry, having made a conscious decision not to use the word "Right!"

"Is it because Big Bill Brown is so mean?" another asked.

"Well, that's not what made me uncomfortable, but that's true, isn't it?" I turned to some more pictures, stopping at one that showed the characters in the book playing on a playground. "Look at these kids here." I held the book so everyone could see. "Now, when I go outside for recess, the kids at our school don't look like the kids in this picture. What do I mean?"

"We don't have a playground!" one enthusiastically offered.

"That's true," I said, "What else?" I paused, and watched them examine the text. "Look at the faces and hands of the kids in this picture, and then look at the faces and hands of your neighbours here on the carpet. What do you notice?"

"They are all white in the book!" one student said.

"Yes," I said, "All the people in this book are the same colour, and that doesn't look like what we have in our schoolyard, does it? We have people of all different colours at our school. If I did these illustrations, then I would draw people the way they look like in our classroom."

"Like Pecola!" said one little girl, holding her arm against Pecola's, comparing the different skin tones.
'There', I thought, 'You've got it.' Conversations erupted among friends, and I sat there, watching the class in their excitement. The class is as multicultural as they come, and Pecola is not alone in her differences. However, I had not acknowledged this in my untroubled delivery of my texts. Now, the door was open, and they could step through. I tried to reveal this text as a construction, one that we can be wary of.

"Okay class." They looked back up at me. "Now, the reason I haven't thrown this book away is that I still like it. I like the story in it, I like how it rhymes, and I like what he wishes for. I don't like the pictures, but in my head, I make them all different. Maybe we should do our own illustrations for this book, then we'd become rich and famous!"

"Yeah!" they shouted.

"Okay, okay... Now what I want you to do is to find a partner..." and we were off into the lesson. And I felt better about Duck Feet.

I embraced my new comfort, and constructed the day's lesson.

This was a small step towards improving my practice. Once I started listening to my discomfort, paying attention to my own critical moments, then I could begin to question what is going on in my classroom, and "render visible the visible" (Bersianik as cited in Lewis, 1996, p. 40). My journey continues in this way, reaching a critical moment, and working to change the inadequate way that I am teaching.

**Action Reflection: Embedded In My Practice**

At this time I need to step back from my text to discuss aspects of its construction in order to add clarity for the reader. Embedded within my inquiry is the Action Reflection methodology that is driving my inquiry. I chose not to make it explicit in order to not unduly interrupt the flow of the text. However, I need to make clear here the motivations and structure of my inquiry.

It is from the critical moments in my practice that changes occur. Returning again to McNiff:

I reach a critical point in my practice;
I feel the need to act;
I act in a chosen direction;
I monitor and evaluate my actions;
I change the direction of my actions in the light of my evaluations. (McNiff, 2000, p. 202)

Learning to listen to these critical moments has initiated most of my growth in my thesis journey. From these moments, I feel compelled to act. In the preceding narrative and the ones to follow, I act by applying Luke’s (2000) Four Resources Model of critical literacy in order to understand my actions and create a way to address the critical point in my practice. I then evaluate this response and continue accordingly, thus perpetuating the action reflection cycle. In the following section, I move my action reflection inquiry to my (mis)management methods.
Chapter Eight: Critical Literacy Within My (Mis)Management

Critical literacy has helped me more fully understand my teaching in helping to un-cover the reasons why I teach the way that I do. However, my disciplining techniques, which I have facetiously referred to as my (mis)management of my students, still stands as a troubling place for me. In this chapter, I turn the lens of critical literacy inwards to my discipline to uncover what I am doing to my students.

Revealing my Discipline

This, perhaps, has been the most difficult of my challenges. I have been examining my position as an instructor, a deliverer of texts, and working to reveal that which I have kept hidden in my practice. However, I have been slow to change my role as the discipliner in the room. My trial by fire from my first year of teaching still endures, and my resulting issue of control has been the most difficult of my experiences to leave behind.

This year, I have a challenging group of children, yet already I am giving myself permission to perpetuate my control. In turning critical literacy inward to my disciplining, I have had to examine and change my practices significantly, working to create a more inclusive learning environment.

Coding practices: Developing resources as a code breaker

How do I crack this text? How does it work? What are its patterns and conventions? How do the sounds and the marks relate, singly and in combinations? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

In treating my disciplining techniques as a text, I can examine them according to my critical literacy framework. In keeping my students in line, I have traditionally used quite a few techniques. Favoured stand-bys have included:

- Finger snap
- Pointed finger
• Quick yell
• Name call
• The eye
• The sigh
• The look
• The lecture

I could go on, naming the various techniques that I have learned, culled from my experiences in ruling a room. These are delivered by me (as the one in charge) and are to be read by its receiver (the one who is not behaving appropriately, again, determined by me).

**Text-meaning practices: Developing resources as a text participant**

> How do the ideas represented in the text string together? What cultural resources can be brought to bear on the text? What are the cultural meanings and possible readings that can be constructed from this text? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

Overall, the design is meant to be brief, low effort, and maximum pay-off, using fear, shame, and humiliation. The desired effect is to control the behaviour, effectively controlling the individual. I am the one monitoring their behaviour, and I am the one defining the expectations. In order to perform within the constructed system, students must know my expectations—this means that they have to know me. They must be able to predict my reactions to their behaviours in order to function without reprisal. As I am human and subject to moods, they must become adept at reading me rather than the expectations. Ultimately, they must learn that using these methods of behaviour management is a form of control. To control in this way is to silence, as these techniques do nothing to foster dialogue.
Pragmatic practices: Developing resources as text user

How do the uses of this text shape its composition? What do I do with this text, here and now? What will others do with it? What are my options and alternatives? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

These various techniques of mine are constructed based upon my past experiences. I deliver these constructions to my students who are not meeting my behavioural expectations. These students then have to decide whether they will meet my expectation or deal with the consequence of their inappropriate action. As there is rarely an opportunity for choice, these students are usually forced into compliance. However, I do have a choice. In knowing what I know now, having re-covered my past experiences to un-cover my hidden assumptions, I can choose to change the way I speak and act within my classroom.

Critical practices: Developing resources as text analyst and critic

What kind of person, with what interests and values, could both write and read this naively and unproblematically? What is this text trying to do to me? In whose interests? Which positions, voices, and interests are at play? Which are silent and absent? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

As the use of these behavioural techniques is to control and to silence, they are employed with this in mind. A student of mine who was concerned with pleasing me would read my disciplining text without problems. A student who feared reprisal would follow my dogma unproblematically. A student who chose to listen to me rather than to his or her self would behave within my specified guidelines.

When examining what I do to my students, I am confronted by the overt hostility intended. These ways of control are just accepted ways of saying, “Sit down and shut up!” In looking at my management in this way, I am called upon to enact a
...
change. I cannot continue treating my students in this way. If I am to work to change the way I speak when I teach, then I should also change the way that I act.

What is obvious to me now is how I have left out the voices of my students in the management process. My beliefs about behaviour management have led me to create a classroom environment governed by one. The reasons behind this governing have been kept hidden, the “Whys” have been covered. If I am to attain praxis, where my theory and my practice collide, then I need to re-vision different possibilities of a learning environment.

Re-visioning my Discipline

In examining my discipline, I realized that what I was doing to my students was reflected in how I was doing my discipline. In silencing my students, I thought that I had control, creating a learning environment that I believed was conducive to learning. However, in centring my voice, I forced my students to behave on my account, according to my desire. I approached the education of my students according to my needs, not the needs of my students.

What Aaron Taught Me

He was out of his desk again! That kid can't focus for the life of him!

He was at it again. He had gotten up to find a pencil, his being lost, stolen, eaten, or any other equally plausible fate. I watch as he circled the classroom, chatting up practically everyone in search for an extra pencil. I witnessed the wake of disruption that followed him—and I was at my wit's end. I was consistently disappointed with him for not following the classroom expectations. I believed that in order for him to complete his tasks, he would have to be quiet and remain seated. He couldn't get this.

I repeatedly tried to reinforce this, monitoring his behaviour, employing my arsenal of techniques his way whenever needed. It wasn't working. My disappointment was combining with my frustration, and our relationship was suffering as a consequence.
I had mentioned to his mother in previous interviews that his learning skills were affecting his grades. He was failing grade 1 because he couldn't stay at his desk. We tried the talks, the consequences, the positive reinforcement. Nothing was working. Then it came to me: The learning environment that I expected Aaron to work in wasn't working for him.

I wanted Aaron to remain seated at his desk for a lengthy period of time, to filter out the distractions that were around him and independently complete work that was difficult for him. His peers, who were constantly moving, surrounded him. I expected him to ignore the clearly enjoyable interactions with his peers in order to focus on individual assignments.

In recognizing that I wanted Aaron to work in an environment that didn't work for him, I was closer to re-visioning a practice that would benefit him. I was not assisting him to achieve these expectations; rather I was constantly reminding him that he wasn't meeting them (through the lectures, talks, sermons, etc.). In this way, I was trying to force Aaron to function in an environment that didn't support him.

I remember the day I decided that things needed to change. It was after school, and I was at my desk. I had just had a particularly difficult day with Aaron. I was busy, engaged with other children for most of the day, and as a result, Aaron got nothing done that day. I had already been thinking for a while about the situation. I understood that things weren't working, but couldn't come up with anything else that would make it work.

"That's the problem, isn't it?" I'm not sure if I said it out loud, but considering the profoundness of the revelation, I might very well have. The classroom wasn't working for Aaron, and no amount of forcing was going to make that happen. I needed to change my perspective and approach this problem from Aaron's perspective. What did Aaron need?

This was a profound shift in my thinking. I expected the same things from all of my kids—they were to perform in the environment that I had structured. This environment reflected what I believed about learning. In asking myself what Aaron needed, I was moving away from my needs, and including Aaron in the discourse of my classroom. Aaron needed to be included, which previously he wasn't.
I looked at my problem with Aaron: He wasn’t completing his work. I believed it was because of the many distractions that surrounded him. I then extended my gaze to my entire class: What is it that they need to perform in my classroom? With respect to my classroom discipline, then, I began to take a needs-based approach. I also began to reveal why I needed them to act this way.

That night, I got to work, and everything changed.

The bell rang. The children began to trickle in from the stairway and stumble down the hall. Some of them still blinked sleep from their eyes; others came to the classroom eager and alert, ready for whatever was going to happen next. I stood at my door, and greeted them when they came in.

“When you come in, see if you can find your desk!” Even as I issued the challenge, I could feel the excitement rise in the air. Some of the children, as they entered the class, immediately turned around and reported their findings to their friends.

“Mr. McClenaghan changed our desks around!” Homework was dropped, children walked around in only one shoe—this was exciting! Where are they going to sit now?

In examining my learning environment critically and looking at what I was trying (unsuccesfully, as with Aaron’s case) to do to my students, I began to see how I structured the environment in a way that did not meet everyone’s needs. I previously had all 21 of my students in three long rows, all facing the front. I had done this because I was frustrated with the amount of talking that was occurring in the classroom, and I felt not enough work was getting done. Therefore, I imposed a blanket disciplining technique on all my kids, regardless of their individual needs. However, in understanding that each child has his or her own needs, I needed to be more creative in addressing these needs.

I watched as my students moved about the room, finding their desks. Some now sat in small groups, some in pairs, some individually. I watched as
friends compared their new proximity to each other, their position in the room, the closeness to the board.

Aaron had walked in, and was floating about the room, searching for his new desk. He was puzzled, because his name card and shoes were not there. He was lost. Where was his stuff?

I called him over.

"Aaron, did you find your desk yet?" I asked.

"No, not yet." He said.

"I put it somewhere very special. Come with me." I led him from the door, through the class, and to my desk. My desk is flanked on one side by a bookshelf standing on a desk. It contains the various resources that I depend on. At the base of this shelf, sitting on the desk, were Aaron's shoes and nametag.

"Aaron, this is your new office." I said. "When you work back here, no one is going to bother you. If you need help with anything, you can just ask me, because I'm right here." I watched him to see what he was thinking.

"Cool!" he said.

"Do you know why I put you back here?" I asked him.

"Because I don't do my work," he said, still obviously excited.

"Yes, that's part of it," I explained. "I need you to complete your work, to show me how smart you are. I know that you know a lot of stuff, but when you don't do your work, then I can't see it. Sometimes I know that people bother you or that you look at other things around you instead of doing your work. Well, I thought that if you had your own office, then it might help you get your work done. What do you think of that?"

"Cool! Thanks Mr. McClenaghan!"

I had not expected such an enthusiastic response from Aaron. I was worried about singling him out to his peers, but he didn't seem concerned. In fact, when asked by his friends why he gets to sit back behind my desk, he tells them that that's his office for him to do his work in.

I still have my problems with Aaron, but things are much better now. I've taken the time to find out what he needs and taken steps to meet that need. My
classroom discipline is no longer wrapped up in the emotional discourse from my first year. I have been able, for the most part, to dis-place that experience from informing my practice. I now readily discuss the “Whys” behind my classroom discipline: Why do you have to do your work? Why do you have to work quietly? Why do you have to listen to the lesson? Why are we doing this? My students and I discuss these questions. Rather than silence, I am trying to encourage dialogue, trying to include their voices. It has been difficult, as old habits are hard to break, but I am trying.

What Barbara Has Taught Me

In the interests of this text, my final critical moment came shortly after I attended a lecture held by Barbara Coloroso, an international education expert on issues of disciplining and bullying. Over the course of this year, during the construction of my thesis, I have been thinking about how I interact with my students. One intriguing idea presented by Coloroso, both in her lecture and her books, was her definitions of three different types of families: The Brick-wall Family, the Jellyfish Family and the Backbone Family.

A brick wall is a nonliving thing, designed to restrict, to keep in, and to keep out: In brick-wall families, the structure is rigid and is used for control and power, both of which are in the hands of the parents. A jellyfish has no firm parts at all and reacts to every eddy and current that comes along. In jellyfish families structure is almost nonexistent; the need for it may not even be acknowledged or understood. A backbone is a living, supple spine that gives form and movement to the whole body. In backbone families structure is present and firm and flexible and functional. (Coloroso, 1995, p. 38)
These ideas of parents in families can easily be transferred over to teachers in classrooms, and Coloroso readily encourages this. And it is this understanding that brought about the last critical moment that I will use in my thesis.

You Can’t Play Nicely, So You Can’t Play At All

Those two were at it again. They were fighting over the Lego-specifically the new tools and equipment I had just introduced. I was still feeling particularly proud over this new addition to my Lego collection-having held onto the box of Lego accessories for over 3 years, for no real reason save for their not getting wrecked or lost. It was during a moment when I was looking introspectively at my stash of “precious” things, items that I had deemed too valuable to allow the kids to play with, that I gave in. In examining my flawed hoarding, I relented and introduced this new addition to the activities, and felt good about my decision. It was with this inflated sense of Self that I approached the conflict.

Both boys were arguing over a small tool. They both had a hold of it (though I don’t know how their hands managed to grip it) and were refusing to back down. The conflict quickly escalated to yelling and pushing.

I was reading quietly with a student at my desk when I was interrupted by the squabble. I looked over and saw both boys trying to rip the small Lego piece out of the other’s hand. I wasn’t particularly mad or angry, though I was annoyed at having been interrupted during my coveted individual reading time.

“Boys!” I said, quite loudly and sternly, “Come here!” They stopped bickering, looked at one another, got up, and came over to my desk. Without a word I took the Lego piece from them, put it on my desk, and resumed reading with my student. They begrudgingly went back to their Lego, sullen in having lost the crucial piece. I sat contented, listening to my student reading, and pleased with myself for having successfully solved a conflict.

While listening to my student, content with my benevolent skills, a damaging thought came to me:

“Oh no! I’m a brick-wall teacher!”
I sat there, stunned. My reader continued to drone on, stumbling, beginning to make up words. I stopped him, hastily graded his efforts (generously, I suspect), and sent him off. I sat back in my chair, reeling. I was shocked and appalled at what I had just done and equally shocked and appalled at how I thought I had solved anything!

After a few moments, I re-collected my thoughts and tried to apply a critical literacy framework to what I had just done.

**Coding practices: Developing resources as a code breaker**

How do I crack this text? How does it work? What are its patterns and conventions? How do the sounds and the marks relate, singly and in combinations? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

I didn’t say anything, apart from calling them over. They had to understand what I wanted. But more important, the conflict was suddenly replaced with trying to understand what I was going to do to them.

**Pragmatic practices: Developing resources as text user**

How do the uses of this text shape its composition? What do I do with this text, here and now? What will others do with it? What are my options and alternatives? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

The command issued by me was brief and stern, implying my authority and unquestionable role of discipliner. The students had to listen to my command, give up the toy, and make do without it.

**Text-meaning practices: Developing resources as a text participant**

How do the ideas represented in the text string together? What cultural resources can be brought to bear on the text? What are the cultural meanings and possible readings that can be constructed from this text? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

Both students learned that, culturally, in that classroom, I was the one in charge. I was the one who was going to solve their problem, because they lacked the ability to do it by themselves.
Critical practices: Developing resources as text analyst and critic

What kind of person, with what interests and values, could both write and read this naïvely and unproblematically? What is this text trying to do to me? In whose interests? Which positions, voices, and interests are at play? Which are silent and absent? (Luke, 2000, p. 454)

My students, complacent in their obedience, returned to continue playing, without their treasured accessory. That they both accepted my unquestionable role of discipliner only continued to support my silencing of their voices. I was trying to shut them up and remove the conflict immediately in the interest of maintaining a quiet classroom environment.

Recovering Their Voices

I called both boys over to me a few minutes later. I had no idea what I was going to say to them. My only thought was that what I did was completely unacceptable-especially from someone who was trying to foster their voices within the classroom, not silence them! The last thing I wanted to tell them was they couldn't solve their problems themselves!

"Um, boys...", I stammered, unsure of what to say next, "I need to apologize to both of you. This was your conflict, your problem, and I had no business solving it for you." I reached for the Lego toy, gave it back to both boys, ensuring that again both were hanging on to it.

"Here you go," I said, "I think you can solve this without me." I sent them back to the carpet area, where they, bewildered, sorted out their problem.

Though this didn't necessarily solve the problem, it was a profound shift in my thinking. I saw what I was doing to my students: imposing my Self upon their conflict and attempting to solve it for them, albeit in a misguided way. However, I re-placed my imposition with my absence—though I gave the conflict back to my students, I did not teach them how to solve it. Barbara Coloroso claims: "Discipline is not judgemental, arbitrary, confusing, or coercive. Going back to the Latin roots, to discipline with authority means to give life to learning" (1995, p. 29). If I am to "give
life to learning," then I need to guide my students through their conflicts. Conflicts need now to be a teaching moment. They may need me to help them solve a conflict-and I need to be present here. This means that I don't do it for them (like taking the Lego away), but creating a discussion about how to work it out.

Re-Placing Their Voices

Since the infamous Lego incident, a lot of changes in my practice have occurred quite rapidly. I know now that I cannot remove my Self from the dialogue that is occurring-which is what I did by giving the Lego back and expecting them to solve it on their own. Instead, I have begun to re-place the version of the discipline that I held previously (the silencer, the controller, the one IN CHARGE) with a version that listens, talks, and guides. I am looking at what I am doing to my students, un-covering the motivations and reasons behind my attempts at behavioural (mis)management. When conflict happens, and it does, I now place myself there WITH my students. Together, we try to sort out the problems.

"Mr. McClenaghan! Max called me stupid!"
"Are you stupid?" I said.
"No!"
"Then this is a problem. Can you go get Max?" Tanya ran off to get him and told him that we needed to talk. I could tell from the look on his face that he was nervous about being in trouble.
"Max, Tanya has a problem with you." I said.
"You called me stupid, and I didn’t like it." Tanya began. Silence from Max's end-he just looked at her.
"Max, Tanya, how can you solve this?"
"He could say sorry." Tanya offered.
"Sure." I said. "He could also let you know that you aren't stupid. What do you think, Max?"
"Sorry." Max said. "You aren't stupid."
"I accept your apology." Tanya said.
“Are you okay with this solution?” I asked Max.
“Yes.” Max said.
“Are you okay with this solution?” I asked Tanya.
“Yes.” Tanya said.
“Okay. Thank you.” I said. And we were done.
This story illustrates my profound shift in thinking. I am there with my students, and I stay involved in the conversation. Disciplining to me now is an opportunity for learning and for growth. I include the voices of my children and work with them to arrive at equitable solutions.

I am not sure if my students have noticed a change in how I interact with them, but I certainly do. Now I am aware of what I am doing, and more importantly WHY I am doing what I am doing. I find that my teaching days are much more fulfilling now. I am having a positive impact on my students because I am much more positive with them. Now that I see disciplining as an opportunity to teach, I no longer shut the conflict down. Conflict, for me now, is an opportunity to bring “life to learning” (Coloroso, 1995, p. 29). Teaching, for me now, is an opportunity to bring “life to learning”. I have improved my practice by giving life to my students’ learning.
Chapter Nine: Reflections, Implications, Teacher Development

I have been working to change the way I speak and write. (hooks as cited in Denzin, 1994, p. 500)

My learning journey is not over; it continues past the conclusion of this text. This final chapter is my attempt at naming aspects of my practice that I feel I have improved, offering my insights to others who may wish to improve their practice.

I have engaged my practice within an Action Reflection perspective, driven by the question, “How do I improve my practice?” (Whitehead, 1989). The significant changes within my practice have occurred because of this inquiry-based approach to examining my practice, framing my reflections with Allan Luke’s (2000) Four Resources Model of critical literacy, telling the story to bring meaning to these reflections. In centring my inquiry on how I might improve my practice, I teach, grounded in reflection and then action upon that reflection, always listening to the critical moments where my values and actions are in conflict.

In my own Preservice training (at York University), reflection was a part of the process, but I resist naming it a critical component of my teacher development training there. In order for reflection to have any substantial impact on the practitioner, I know now that it needs to involve more than just how a particular lesson was delivered. I believe that reflection needs to centre on the practitioner. It is the practitioner who needs to learn to listen to the critical moments that occur within their practice and examine these moments critically. This critique entails knowing one’s own values, and knowing when they are in conflict with one’s actions, thereby leading the practitioner to improve his/her practice. This personal critique needs to begin as an internal process, grounded within personal reflection, then, turning the gaze outward, to positively affect one’s practice.
Following this, then, I feel that the construction of teacher instruction should be revealed for what it may be, whether it is a deliberate attempt to do something to students, based upon assumptions of learning held by the practitioner, or a co-operative attempt to guide students along their learning journey. This construction then needs to be questioned and challenged accordingly, as all critical consumers must do to the texts that surround them. In treating children as critical consumers within the educational institution, revealing the manipulation embedded within the texts that surround them, I believe we need to get our students to begin to challenge and upset the assumptions that may not serve them well. As with Pecola, more students can begin to see that they do not have to blindly accept that which is presented to them by their teachers, if only their teachers are brave enough to invite this critique.

Today, I still struggle daily with my students, with my management, with my teaching. Things haven't become easier, just easier to live with. I live daily with the tension between what I now see as being in control of the classroom and being responsible for the classroom. I have learned that I cannot remove my Self from the classroom, but I can certainly get out of the way. I have attempted to re-inscribe my place within the classroom, sharing my voice with the others who inhabit the space along with me. I am looking at what I am saying and trying to say less. I am looking at how I am listening and trying to listen more. My instruction now is a construction of my assumptions on how children learn, and I am working to admit this to my students. I am foregrounding my discourse as this construct, constantly challenging my students with the powerful word: WHY?

"No!" he said emphatically. "Power rests on the kind of knowledge one holds. What is the sense of knowing things that are useless?" (Castaneda, 1998, p. xxxvii)
An Epilogue, An Open Door

Yesterday, I successfully defended this text, passing with distinction my Master's of Education oral hearing. The one small charge the committee burdened me with was to make a few changes to the text by writing about some of the things we had discussed. This, it turns out, is a much more difficult task than I had anticipated. So, I will story it. This story is my outward gaze, my attempt at revealing my thoughts, at the moment, in beginning the life-long journey of becoming a teacher.

One of the overarching tensions for me, a throwback to my positivist psychology days, is the desire to remain neutral within my instruction. In the beginning of my inquiry I felt I needed to take my Self out of the instruction, so as to not taint my data. This became especially evident during my Barbie For Boys inquiry. However, I now believe that it is not possible. Teaching is intensely personal, dependent upon my own personal beliefs and philosophies. I cannot remove my Self from my instruction, but I can highlight my intent within my construction for others, my students, my colleagues, to critique. I need to ask of my Self: What am I doing when I teach? What power do I hold? What about this power? What does it contain? How is it supported? How is it resisted? What is my responsibility here with respect to guiding this critical inquiry?

My B. Ed. did not prepare me to inquire about meaning making; it was concerned with the delivery of information, the perpetuation of procedural knowledge. There was no shift for me towards constructed knowledge, no real attempt made at dialoguing, an internal reflection shared with others, contributing to the journey of becoming a teacher. I reflected upon the delivery of my lessons, the transmission of information, but did not think about the thinking of my students. I did not think about how they would be constructing meaning from my Self, my actions, my lessons.

Graduating with my B. Ed., I mistakenly felt that I had arrived, that I was now a teacher. However, this mistake, this finality of development, did not foster an ongoing desire to continue my inquiry into becoming a teacher. Throughout my early education I worked successfully within the system of schooling, reading the teachers, utterly dependent upon the context of my instruction to meet my teacher's expectations. My own B. Ed. did not fully
prepare me to make the transition from the one reading the context to the one constructing this context, the one shaping the instruction, the one realizing that I depended upon my own assumptions of learning in order to teach. In learning to teach, I was neither prepared nor aware of the need to challenge and critique my Self in order to become a better teacher. In surviving my first years as an (mis)educator, I saw no need to question my assumptions of learning. These assumptions had previously served me so well, thereby perpetuating systems of dominance that supported my positioning.

I realize, though, that the idealism I speak of now, the need to be critically aware as a teacher, needs to be somehow embedded within the institutions that are mandated to train individuals like my Self, those who wish to become teachers. I was taught the rudimentary skills of becoming a teacher, learning barely enough to survive my first year. I could not see beyond my lesson plans, my delivery of instruction, my transmission of skills. I was not equipped nor prepared to be both critically aware and survive my first year of teaching. I was neither prepared nor willing to question WHY I was doing these things to my students. As I had no real idea of what I was doing, I felt I couldn’t very well admit this to my students, though clearly they already knew this. I remained unwaveringly attached to my (mis)management, determined that if I had control, I would be a good teacher.

I refer throughout this text as it being a journey of Self-development, a spiralling account of introspection, with my inquiry driven by the desire to improve my practice. This text is my beginning attempt to name my own critical text, yet the implications outwards become convoluted. How can my text contribute to teacher development training? As a teacher teaching teachers how to teach, how can these teachers reveal the text that is teacher training? How can emerging teachers be drawn inwards, past lesson plans, past skills and techniques, past the series of curriculum expectations, to the text of instruction, the critical intent within teaching? In teaching the practice of becoming a teacher, how can B. Ed. programs foster an inquiry-based model of instructional improvement, beyond the perpetuation of past experiences? How can teacher development programs initiate teachers into the life-long journey of becoming a teacher? How might these programs
sustain the inquiry beyond the conclusion of the teacher development program?

Now that I am awake to this journey into becoming a teacher, now that the door is open, I also realize that my students are not enough to sustain this journey of mine. I am working towards fostering the voices of my students, sharing space within my practice, yet, what happens when my students leave my room, participating in the instruction from another who may not wish to foster their voices? My students will move on, whether on to a critically awake teacher or not, leaving me to continue my journey with a new group. Where is there a home for my journey, a collection of colleagues to journey with, to share in the process of becoming a teacher? Where are there others for me to inquire with? Where is there a community for me of reflective practitioners?

I keep returning to the image of an opened door. My journey has led me to this door, leading into a room, one new to me, yet always available. Within this room is my future of critical possibilities. Within this room is a new way of teaching, a beginning of a journey in learning to become a teacher. A light has been turned on, the result of my critical reflection, illuminating for me this room that was once dark. From this room, I can now begin to teach in a critical way. In teaching this way, I can invite my students and interested others to join me here. With the light on now, I can more safely guide my students through the possibilities within a critical education.

This thesis is a beginning: a beginning step into this room, a beginning of a critical perspective, a beginning of becoming a critical teacher, a beginning of engagement with a critical pedagogy. And from this beginning, stepping through this door, my journey continues...
References


