

# A Critical Literacy Engagement with *The Whale Rider*

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**Abstract** *In this brief contribution, I present what I mean by critical literacy and why I think it is important. I argue that in the novel “The Whale Rider” (1987), Witi Ihimaera has gifted us with a (re)constructed text that can be viewed as an outcome of his critical literacy readings of the pūrākau<sup>1</sup> [story] of Paīkea.*

**Keywords** *agency; critical literacy; power; praxis; text*

## Introduction

I first met critical literacy when I was completing my teacher education course at California State University Sacramento, preparing to become a bilingual (Spanish and English) primary school teacher. After completing my doctorate 14 years later, here, at the University of Otago, I returned to critical literacy and have not stopped researching and teaching about it. In an age of misinformation, climate crisis, rapidly changing technologies and a pedagogical pendulum swing emphasising traditional literacies, I firmly believe that this work is more vital than ever.

## Critical literacy: Mandate and definition

I think we can probably all agree that we are inundated with information. Sadly, the pandemic has taught us that we are not immune to mis- and disinformation here in Aotearoa New Zealand. As our former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern explained in a commencement address:

In a disinformation age, we need to learn to analyse and critique information. That doesn't mean teaching 'mistrust' but rather as my old history teacher Mr Fountain

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1 I use quite a few kupu [or te reo Māori vocabulary] in this contribution. I define the kupu the first time I use it and there is a glossary at the end.

extolled: 'to understand the limitations of a single piece of information, and that there is always a range of perspectives on events and decisions.' (Ardern 2022)

In other words, we have an imperative to critically engage with texts and consider a range of perspectives.

Simply put, critical literacy represents a critical stance towards texts. We take a critical stance towards the texts we construct and the texts constructed by others. I want to take a moment to unpack the term 'critical'. As we have written elsewhere, "the term *critical* has a number of different meanings that can have positive or negative connotations. It can be used to mean fault finding... [it] can be used to mean extremely important... It can also mean indispensable or vital" (Sandretto and Klenner 2011, 10). Importantly, critical analysis is not necessarily about being negative.

When I facilitate professional development workshops with *kaiako* [teachers], I can meet the 'but we are already doing this' body posture. The current New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education 2007) does not explicitly mandate the teaching of critical literacy. It does, however, direct *kaiako* to support *ākonga* [students] to think critically about texts. These are not the same thing.

Critical thinking with texts can involve inferring meaning, justifying an opinion, or comparing and contrasting different viewpoints – what we might call higher-order thinking skills. According to McLaren (1998), we need to be cautious because these skills can be practised without attention to the cultural, historical, political or social context. In other words, *kaiako* and their *ākonga* can engage in critical thinking about a text without attending to the *power* of texts to shape their understandings of themselves or others.

But what do I mean by the term text? I use the term text in the broadest sense. A text can be constructed using multiple modes of meaning: oral language or written language, as well as audio, gestural, spatial, tactile or visual modes as described by Cope and Kalantzis (2009). The term text has a Latin *whakapapa* [heritage] coming from the Latin terms *textus* meaning tissue and *texere* meaning weave. For Bull and Anstey (2010) the term text captures the idea of "weaving a tissue of meaning" (8). This broad understanding of what constitutes a text means that we can critically analyse just about anything: from a newspaper article, movie, picture, advertising, speech, to *tukutuku* panels [weavings] and *whakairo* [carvings].

Critical literacy involves the understanding that texts are not neutral. The term neutral evokes images of beige, bland or inoffensive texts. But if we understand texts as typically constructed by someone to convey something, we know that the author's worldview is woven into the fabric of that text. When teaching about critical literacy, I often set a homework task that asks *ākonga* to bring in a neutral text for us to analyse. They find it very difficult to find one.

Authors construct texts for many different purposes. According to the author George Orwell (2004), the purpose could be encompassed by sheer egoism, aesthetic

enthusiasm, historical impulse or political purpose. In the author notes for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *The Whale Rider*, Witi Ihimaera explained he wrote the novel for his daughters who were tired of boys always being cast as heroes. It is rare, however, to have such insight into the author's purpose for constructing a particular text. Authors construct texts at particular cultural, historical, political and social moments. Some texts that may have been (somewhat) acceptable at a particular moment in time can be critically analysed today and (re)constructed. So rather than focus on the author's motivations, which we cannot always know, we can focus on the power or effects of texts.

Regardless of the author's purpose, authors make choices when constructing texts, meaning that all texts have gaps, silences, and particular representations within them. I often talk about the weight of representation. I suggest to *kaiako* that the one-off text that has a sexist, racist, or ableist representation, for instance, is possibly not as problematic as a multitude of texts that represent particular groups in particular ways. That is, when a group finds themselves marginalised or represented unfairly on a regular basis. Or alternatively, when our *ākonga* cannot find themselves or their *whānau* [family] in the texts at school. Please don't get me wrong, I am not saying that *all* texts are not worthy of a critical literacy analysis. But I am saying that the weight of representation can be very heavy.

So what is the purpose of critical literacy? In our research, we suggest the purpose of critical literacy is “to help students focus on uncovering the perspectives and positions that underpin texts, and to ask and judge what these perspectives might mean in terms of the social construction of their world” (Sandretto and Klenner 2011, 14). A critical literacy engagement with texts encourages us to consider the effects of texts.

A primary purpose of critical literacy is agency. I use the term agency to capture “the idea that a reader can have power, through analysis, to agree or disagree with the constructions and representations found in a particular text” (Sandretto and Klenner 2011, 237). Analysis of texts can lead us to decide to affirm or resist them, to use them or (re)design them. In other words, the language of critique can lead us to the language of possibility (Giroux 1988).

Critical literacy is necessarily deeply ethical work. In my work with *kaiako*, we have likened a critical literacy lesson to “opening up Pandora's box” (Sandretto and Klenner 2011, 55). Everyone has different knowledge and experiences that they bring to texts and makes sense of texts differently. The concept of multiple readings acknowledges that we can celebrate our differences and that there is no one correct critical literacy reading of a text. This means that *kaiako* do not know what contributions *ākonga* will make and will have to navigate tricky normative ground. In one meeting *kaiako* explained:

That's where you get into that shaky ground. So you're busy listening to all these kids' ideas and their multiple readings and you're telling them you know, 'there's no wrong answer'. But then a kid says 'oh you know all women should be in the kitchen'. [And that causes you to question]. Then you go, well hang on, are we actually valuing all of their readings [the same]? (Sandretto and Klenner 2011, 211)

After much discussion, the research group came to the decision that we could not in good conscience value all readings equally. We had a duty to *all ākongā* and as such we had an ethical bottom line, or normative ground: "Our normative ground: free thinking within a parameter. For us, the parameter is that we would not allow students to maintain readings that might be harmful to others" (Sandretto and Klenner 2011, 225). This would require a critical literacy reading of the text the *ākongā* has just contributed: Who might be privileged or disadvantaged by the view they have just shared?

When unpacking the term critical earlier, I noted that power is an important consideration for critical literacy. All texts have effects. Texts have consequences for how we make sense of ourselves, others and the world. Critical literacy is focused on the power of texts and the need for *kaiako* to support *ākongā* to affirm or resist particular positions and representations in texts. Ultimately, it's about agency so that *ākongā* have power over texts, rather than texts having power over *ākongā*. As my colleagues and I have written elsewhere,

Critical literacy involves navigating the workings of power as captured in texts, critical consideration of the consequences of texts, and ultimately social action... Action can be in the form of (re)constructing a new text to speak back to an unjust or inequitable text or challenging one's thinking. (Sandretto et al. 2021, 117)

Critical literacy practice reminds us that we cannot take texts at face value.

### **A critical literacy engagement with *The Whale Rider***

In the author notes, Witi explained, "patriarchy and I are old opponents" (Ihimaera 2007, 184). In this short contribution, I argue that *The Whale Rider* is the outcome of a critical literacy analysis by Witi. It can be viewed as the reconstruction of Paikea, where Witi places the granddaughter Kahu as the heir to take up the position of Kahutia Te Rangī, or Paikea.

Witi elaborated on his deconstruction of patriarchy and other inequities in the author notes:

It has been a major theme in all my work: issues of race, nation, class, gender and sexuality should not delimit the right of all human beings to equity, equality and justice, whatever world they live in. Traditional frameworks must change, to enable leaders to come forward; and a person's qualities should not be subordinated to traditional roles and expectations. (184)

Given this purpose, it is not surprising that Witi wrote *The Whale Rider*.

There are multiple instances in the book where Witi reconstructs cultural traditions to speak back to patriarchy. In education, we know that culture is not set in stone, a fossil to be placed in a museum. Culture is productive and creative, morphing, evolving, and changing to provide a guide to acting, feeling, and thinking (Campbell 2000). We meet this productive and creative version of culture early on in *The Whale Rider*:

The trouble was that Koro Apirana could not reconcile his traditional beliefs about Māori leadership and rights with Kahu's birth. By Māori custom, leadership was hereditary and normally the mantle of *mana* [prestige] fell from the eldest son to the eldest son. Except that in this case, there was an eldest daughter. (25–26)

And again, with regard to Kahu's name, the narrator explains:

I could understand, however, why the old man was so against the idea. Not only was Kahutia Te Rangī a man's name but it was also the name of the ancestor of our village. Koro Apirana felt that naming a girl-child after the founder of our tribe was belittling Kahutia Te Rangī's prestige. From that time onward, whenever Koro Apirana went past the meeting house, he would look up at the figure of Kahutia Te Rangī on the whale and shake his head sorrowfully. (30)

Another example in the novel takes place when Koro Apirana begins a school of learning, but it is just for the boys. He was intent on developing and identifying a leader. Kahu was desperate to attend, and Nanny Flowers did not discourage her.

Ever since the school had started, Nanny Flowers had been chucking off at Koro Apirana. While she agreed that the instruction should take place, she couldn't help feeling affronted about the exclusion of women. 'Them's the rules,' Koro Apirana had told her. 'I know, but rules are made to be broken,' she had replied in a huff. (53)

I noted before that we need to take a critical literacy lens to the texts we construct as well as the texts constructed by others. I have also noted the tricky ethical ground involved in critical literacy work, and probably no more so than when engaging with a text where we may not have the cultural knowledge to develop an informed criti-

cal literacy analysis. While many have celebrated both, the novel and the movie *The Whale Rider*, it is not without its critics. Māori scholars Brendan Hokowhitu (2007) and Tania Ka'ai (2005), for instance, found the movie problematic, as highlighted in the article by Emeritus Professor Alistair Fox. These critical readings remind us that the work of critical literacy analysis will never be complete.

Earlier I explained that the New Zealand curriculum at the time of my lecture did not provide a policy mandate for kaiako to support their ākonga to grow the practices of critical literacy. However, the curriculum has been undergoing a refresh. The English Learning area for Years 0–6 (ages 5–11) (Ministry of Education 2024) names *Critical analysis* as an important practice for all ākonga to develop. It is defined as

Critical analysis involves close reading, viewing, and listening to texts in order to interpret, appreciate, and challenge them. It enables us to make connections within, across, and beyond texts by analysing the relationships between language and ideas in the texts. When we consider and respectfully discuss different perspectives on texts with others, we develop new insights. (17)

In my view, unfortunately, this description more closely aligns to critical thinking than it does to the practice of critical literacy, lacking explicit attention to power. I remain hopeful, however, that *kaiako* and *ākonga* will leverage the possibilities that may arise through the practices of critical analysis and develop the practices of critical literacy in deliberate and sustained ways.

## Conclusion

Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua.

This whakataukī [proverb] aptly captures Māori conceptualisations of time. It means: I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past. In Western understandings of time, the past is behind us and the future is in front. Ranginui Walker (1996) explains:

In Māori philosophy, there were only two dimensions to time – past and future. The past was designated *mua*, and the future termed *muri*. Both had double meanings. *Mua* also meant 'in front of' or 'ahead'. This means that the past is conceived of as being in front of human consciousness, because only the present and the past are knowable. *Muri*, designating the future, also means 'behind', because the future cannot be seen. Thus, the individual is conceptualised as travelling backwards in time to the future, with the present unfolding in front as a continuum into the past. (13–14)

I am suggesting that we need to keep the past and future at play as we critically analyse texts in the present.

Praxis, from the work of Brazilian literacy educator Paulo Freire (1999, 33), captures the connections between text and context, it is “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (33). In *The Whale Rider*, Witi has engaged in praxis, in critically reflecting, and rewriting; showing us what is possible.

## Glossary

ākonga	student
kaiako	teacher
kupu	word, vocabulary
mana	prestige, influence
mua	past, in front of, ahead
muri	future, behind,
pepeha	introduction
pūrākau	story
tukutuku	weaving
whakairo	carving
whakapapa	heritage
whakataukī	proverb
whānau	family

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