

# Preservice Teacher Engagement With Critical Policy Analysis

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This research casts an academic literacies gaze on early childhood preservice teacher engagement with critical policy analysis. Engaging critically with policy analysis, involves attending to macro and micro political and practice ramifications. It is acknowledged that critical thinking and critical analysis do not come easily to students and the use of frameworks can assist in scaffolding such complex literacies practices. This case study examines the application of the *Affirmative Discourse Intervention* model as a guiding framework to inform early childhood pre-service teacher engagement with critical policy analysis. A content analysis methodology was used involving the thematic analysis of secondary data in the form of student-completed ADI frameworks. The findings show the framework helped students to move past an initial “glance” over the document to a more sustained engagement with it. This sustained engagement supports the notion of critical policy analysis requiring a reading and (re)reading, which is more than just reading multiple times but looking at what is presented or being said from multiple standpoints. This research is important as policy analysis within professional discourse is a call for action, for agency and autonomy to question, challenge, and an opportunity to exert influence. Uncritical engagement with policy is the opposite. It is a form of inaction, passivity, a taking what is given as true and the way things should and will be.

*Keywords:* affirmative discourse intervention, early childhood education, academic literacies, policy analysis, pre-service teachers

## Introduction

This article examines preservice early childhood teacher engagement with critical policy analysis from an academic literacies perspective. The aim of this research was to evaluate the application of the *Affirmative Discourse Intervention* (ADI) model (Hunkin et al., 2020) as a guiding framework to inform early childhood preservice teacher of policy analysis. The article begins with a brief outline of early childhood education policy within Aotearoa, New Zealand. Attention is then given to academic literacies and the challenge students face with critical thinking. This is followed by an outline of the ADI model to support critical policy analysis and the outcome from the evaluation of its application with early childhood pre-service teachers.

## Policy Landscape of ECE in Aotearoa, New Zealand

As a sector, early childhood education (ECE) in Aotearoa, New Zealand is relatively new. The history of ECE reflects wider societal influences both nationally and internationally. Images of the child, the role and function of ECE as well as the discourse associated with those who work within ECE and the challenge to acquire professional recognition are still very much alive and ongoing (May, 2019). Policy in Aotearoa, New Zealand portrays how ECE has been positioned within discourses of health, welfare, and education. It is significant that

with the *Education to Be More: Report of the Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group*, widely known as the *Meade Report* (New Zealand Department of Education, 1988) and *Before Five* (Lange, 1988) in the late 1980's government accepted that ECE was an important sector of the educational landscape. Since then the most significant policy developments did not emerge until the late 1990's with the creation of the first ECE curriculum within Aotearoa, New Zealand and the first long term strategy in 2002, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002).

*Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002), was the first long-term strategy within Aotearoa, New Zealand for any educational sector and was introduced under a labour-led government (Mitchell et al., 2008). The strategy was aspirational and emerged through “extensive consultation with the early childhood education sector, within a framework of increasing participation, improving quality, and promoting collaborative relationships” (Mitchell et al., 2008, p. 11). This first 10-year strategy for early childhood education, consisted of specific goals for the time spanning 2002-2012. Despite the significance given to *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002) its success was disrupted with changing governments from Labour to National led in 2008. The disruption of governmental change impacted the implementation of this inaugural 10-year strategy (Farquhar & Gibbons, 2019) with a noticeable break for the sector from 2012 until the introduction of *He Taonga te Tamaiti: Every Child a Taonga* (Ministry of Education, 2019).

*He Taonga te Tamaiti: Every Child a Taonga* (HTtT) (Ministry of Education, 2019), is the current early childhood education ten-year strategy. This new strategy document outlines the focus for early childhood education within Aotearoa, New Zealand during 2019-2029. It comes on the wake of the first 10-year strategy. HTtT, introduced just as the COVID-19 breakout, began to take hold in 2020, impacting its initial implementation. This current 10-year strategy consists of five objectives which acknowledge the diverse context that is ECE in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The document sits alongside other government strategies, which span wider government departments and ministries, such as the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* (New Zealand et al., 2019) to support the bold vision that “New Zealand be the best place in the world for children and young people” (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 5).

As stated, this current 10-year strategy was introduced in late 2019, and its implementation was affected by the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic early in 2020, which is still ongoing in 2022. Enactment is what gives life to policy within any given context and is a process that requires the capacity to engage critically in interpreting and translating policy within and across contexts, situations, and practices (Singh, Heimans, & Glasswell, 2014). Enactment, as opposed to implementation is argued to disrupt the idealism with reality of the educational context (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011). The challenge facing preservice teachers with enactment of policy is an issue of emerging professional practice as well as capacity to engage deeply and critically with policy documents, which is an issue associated with academic literacies.

### **Academic Literacies and Policy Analysis**

Academic literacies theory attends to the social construction of literacies thereby seeing past a limited focus on skills and techniques alone (Lea, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998). As such this approach acknowledges that as social practices, literacies are “rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being” (Street, 2003, p. 78). Preservice teacher engagement with academic literacies is embedded with the discourse of academia and also that of the professional realm of teaching. Being, identity, and knowledge development are therefore bound within the coexisting discourses of academia and early childhood education. These coexisting discourses reflect the

relational nature of literacies practices, which relate to the individual, groups, and communities (Perry, 2012).

Academic literacies theory is a form of critical theory with its emphasis on relations of power and social participation (Gee, 1990). From a critical theory perspective, literacies practices inform one's position within the world, participation within it and therefore sense of reality. According to transformation theory, literacies practices involve making connections between the self and the outside world in order to affect change in one's position through literacies in action (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). Such relational positions align with notions of the subjugated and the subjugator (Bourdieu, 2007). Literacies practices therefore, facilitate the opportunity for personal transformation and the ability to have an impact on and influence the social world (Freire, 2000).

It is well documented that undergraduate students find critical thinking challenging (Miri, David, & Uri, 2007) and even on attaining an undergraduate qualification Halx (2022) argues there is no guarantee that such higher order processing will be maintained. Critical thinking is defined as a higher order thinking which is recognised as "a non-algorithmic, complex mode of thinking that often generates multiple solution. Such thinking involves uncertainty, application of multiple criteria, reflection and self-regulation" (Miri et al., 2007, p. 355). Critical thinking involves skills required to analyse, evaluate, and make inferences and dispositions including an attitude of inquiry, motivation, and drive (Facione, 2000).

Extending its significance further Brookfield (2012) argues that critical thinking is an inherently political process, bound within the wider moral context where our decision-making influences the lives of others. The criticality of such thinking aligns with the notion of conscientization proposed by Freire (2000). The critical thinker becomes an agent challenging moral and political passivity through critique of hegemony. For students, being a critical thinker means that they have the opportunity to be "well-equipped to leave a positive impact on [the world], not depart it as if they were never there" (Miri et al., 2007, p. 5); equating to what Freire referred to as being "of the world" and not just "in the world" (Freire, 2000, p. 71). Finally, in the context of the critical analysis of educational policy being critical is associated with "being sceptical about common sense; being sceptical about official knowledge; working on understanding how power works through knowing and subjectivity" (Hattam, 2020, p. 80).

In the context of this research, engaging critically with policy analysis, involves attending to macro and micro political and practice ramifications. Critical policy analysis involves both skills and also mindset. Skills relate to being able to question, read, and (re)read the policy "landscape" as text but also as lived experience. This critical analysis involves being able to appreciate different positions within the analytic process, aligning with mindset (Dweck, 2006). Critical analysis as mindset involves an openness and receptivity to difference, alternate, and other possible realities. Policy is therefore appreciated for its complexity and multiple layers of intention/implication, action, and impact. Policy analysis within professional discourse is a call for action for agency and autonomy to questions, challenge, and an opportunity to exert influence. Uncritical engagement with policy is the opposite. It is a form of inaction, passivity, a taking what is given as true and the way things should and will be.

### **Affirmative Discourse Intervention**

The ADI is an approach to critical policy analysis developed by Hunkin et al. (2020). The model consists of three areas of focus: discourse recognition, discourse disruption, and discourse agency. The three processes of the ADI model are regarded as "interrelated, free-flowing, and unending, highlighting how a shift in understanding or critique in any process will likewise influence the others" (Hunkin et al., 2020, p. 5). The ADI

model consists of guiding questions that are written in easily accessible language, to help in the analysis of policy and lead to more in-depth critical thinking, deeper thinking. The questions within the model act as “theoretical markers around which new thought and agentic action can be anchored” (Hunkin et al., 2020, p. 6). Through the processes embedded in the model policy discourse is challenged in an attempt to reflect on what is presented as “truth”, “real”, and the implication for different social actors and for what end. This approach encourages and provides for a more agentic engagement with policy, looking beyond the surface to examine not only policy “content” but also the impact of action or non-action.

As stated, the ADI model consists of three interrelated processes: discourse recognition, discourse disruption, and discourse agency. Discourse recognition involves “an investigation of government’s (or governments’) knowledge production and promotion activities at a specific point in time” (Hunkin et al., 2020, p. 6). This part of the ADI process is about the how and why of policy creation. The process of discourse disruption is about challenging “the ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions of the policy problem and policy situations by critically reflecting on how these assemblages encourage subjects to think and act on the policy” (Hunkin et al., 2020, p. 7). Finally, discourse agency is “a process of identifying counter truths and accompanying opportunities for truth-telling” (Hunkin et al., 2020, p. 7). This process links to everyday acts of policy and opportunities for resistance and change. Engaging with or applying the ADI model is regarded as a fluid process, which can begin with any of the three processes and can move back and forth between them all as the policy analysis progresses. This dynamic sense of movement gives the critical analysis a sense of life, positioning policy, and policy analysis as an exploration into lived experience.

### **Context**

The ADI model was incorporated within a final year course as part of the Bachelor Teaching and Learning (Early Childhood Education) in which students struggled with engaging in a critical way with educational policy. On discovery of the ADI model, it was decided that the model could be used to support students with the complex task of critical policy analysis. This paper specifically focuses on the incorporation of the ADI model during the 2022 delivery of the course. The use of the ADI model also reinforces sound academic literacies practices through the application of frameworks to scaffold and guide student thought processes. In the context of this study, the framework was used as a form of instructional scaffolding to enhance preservice teacher higher order thinking. Scaffolding is a form of support facilitating student meaningful participation in and attainment of a variety of learning skills and practices. Scaffolding needs to be timely, encouraging transfer or responsibility to ensure self-determination and motivation within literacies practices, rather than dependency on the teacher (Belland, 2014). Scaffolding structures are an aspect of academic literacies practices, which acknowledge the need to support student transition into and throughout their academic experience (Trimmingham, Devereux, Macken-Horarik, & Wilson, 2004). In the context of this study, the scaffolding process involved a means to focus students’ attention to and engage with a complex document. The scaffolding consisted of purposeful layers.

A version of the ADI model was introduced to students, which was contextualised with questions and examples specific to the early childhood context in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Students were required to use the provided ADI framework in order to analyse HTtT, the early childhood education policy form 2019-2029. From this process students needed to identify questions to facilitate a critical dialogue about the policy with teachers during their forthcoming placement in an early childhood centre. The final stage of the process was for students to write a critical analysis of the outcomes of the findings from the questions asked and the dialogue that took

place around the current early childhood policy. Students were required to submit a copy of their completed ADI framework as part of their assessment. No grade was awarded for the content of the ADI framework itself.

### **Method**

The inquiry into student's use of the ADI model to support critical policy analysis was informed by asking how critical thinking was represented in the student completed ADI frameworks. A content analysis research design was utilised drawing on the secondary data from existing student-completed ADI documents. According to Johnston (2014, p. 620) "Secondary analysis is a systematic method with procedural and evaluative steps". In this instance, the analysis process involved cross referencing completed ADI frameworks with examples of critical thinking identified in the literature. A total of 37 ( $n = 37$ ) ADI frameworks and summary documents were analysed for features of critical analysis. *QSR Nvivo* software was used for the thematic analysis of the documents. Inductive and deductive coding was utilised. Inductive coding was driven by the themes emerging from the content analysis, and deductive coding coming from interpretations and descriptions of critical thinking and critical policy analysis as described in the literature.

### **Presentation of Findings**

This section outlines the findings of the content analysis of the student-completed ADI frameworks, in relation to evidence of student critical thinking. In relation to the first research question, seven themes emerged from analysis of the student-completed ADI frameworks, which aligned with aspects of critical thinking reflecting. The themes are shown in order of most frequently occurring in the data. Of the 37 analysed ADI frameworks:

#### **Multiple Sources**

This theme refers to student inclusion or reference to more than just the main policy document under analysis. References to multiple sources were evident in 23 of the ADI frameworks analysed. This capacity to refer to or at least acknowledge the place of wider supporting documents that inform educational policy reflects critical thinking in relation to the application of multiple criteria and an attitude of inquiry. This theme also acknowledges the complexity to education and the enactment of educational policy.

#### **Alternate Perspective or Challenge**

The identification of tension in relation to how the policy did not easily align with the audience or "reality" of the sector reflects the capacity for students to see past the idea of "truth" or reality as portrayed within the policy. The identification of alternate perspectives or challenges associated with the policy HTtT was evident in 16 frameworks. This theme reflects critical thinking through the capacity to be open to multiple solutions or possibilities through the sceptical evaluation of information.

#### **Potential Policy Enactment**

This theme related to making connections to the application of the policy to own practice or wider sector application and the how and why of this action. 15 analysed ADI frameworks referenced potential policy enactment. As an example of critical thinking, considering policy as enactment showed student capacity to evaluate the information provided in relation to multiple contexts and influencing factors. This ability to transfer information or understanding from one context to another is important in relation to the teachers being able to be critically engaged practitioners.

### **Questions Generated**

The generating of questions reflected critical thinking through student capacity to not just accept what was in the policy but actively seek to problematise the policy. This is a form of questioning evidence. These questions related to the impact of enacting policy, challenging meaning or perspectives and identification of potential gaps in the policy. 14 of the analysed ADI frameworks showed the generation of questions.

### **Bias Recognition**

The identification of bias within the policy demonstrates the capacity to evaluate information, appreciate diversity or alternatives perspectives. Bias recognition acknowledges that policy is never neutral. 11 analysed ADI frameworks identified bias recognition.

### **Argument Generation**

This theme reflects the capacity to develop a response or point that responded to an issue, tension, or challenge identified within the policy. Seven of the ADI frameworks analysed showed evidence of argument generation. The capacity to generate an argument or form of response to what was evident within the policy document reflects critical thinking through the capacity to question, evaluate, inquire, and challenge.

### **Problem Identification**

Identification of a tension or “problem” inherent within the policy again reflects the capacity to question as an aspect of critical thinking. Problem identification reflected the capacity to conceptualise the policy in action and once again to cast a sceptical eye over what was being read. Of the ADI frameworks analysed, five showed evidence of problem identification.

## **Discussion of Findings**

This article explores the use of the ADI framework as a means to support student critical policy analysis from an academic literacies perspective. In this context the modified ADI framework was used to guide students through the process of critically analysing the current ECE policy in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

As the data shows, the use of the ADI framework as a template that had to be submitted as part of the assessment, made student critical policy engagement visible. Such visibility to thought processes, enables teacher educators to better support the challenges that students face in higher order thinking (Miri et al., 2007). It was clear from the use of the ADI framework, that students could respond to the prompts generated by the overall structure of the ADI and the modifications made to make this context specific. The examples of critical thinking from preservice teachers as they applied the ADI framework, reflect the capacity to identify tensions between the reality of the sector as envisioned through the current 10-year strategy and the reality as lived experience for teachers. Through their critical engagement with policy students identified the potential for mismatch between the definitions of reality but also began to appreciate the influence and power that policy has in driving these same notions of reality. Accepting notions of truth provided by policy, not only determines where or what is given attention, but also according to Foucault (2002, p. 49), creates that same reality, by “systematically form[ing] the objects of which they speak”. The identification of bias and absent voices within the ECE strategic plan, showed that students were beginning to appreciate that policy does not mean the same across audiences and contexts. The instrumental function of policy alone, becomes questionable, with a need to engage more deeply with the overall idea of why and what policy is for (Carusi, 2021).

The framework helped students to move past an initial “glance” over the document to a more sustained

engagement with it. This process was not easy and was supported by the range of scaffolding activities noted previously. This sustained engagement supports the notion of critical policy analysis requiring a reading and (re)reading, which is more than just reading multiple times but looking at what is presented or being said from multiple standpoints. For example, the modified ADI enabled students to make connections between one policy document and the many others that feed into and also feed out from this overarching strategy. The ability for students to make the connection for themselves, rather than just being told supports the move into a more critically engaged space. Those students who drew on or acknowledged the many multiple sources that inform the enactment of policy showed insight in understanding the complexity of the educational space.

If as discussed by Bainbridge (2015) learning comes from experience, then learning to be a critical thinker comes from being exposed to experiences that require this kind of thought. The benefit to the ADI model is that it provides both a supportive structure for this exploration and also casts a light on the journey, by making thinking transparent. It acts as a form of feedback to the student as they engage through the learning process, thus supporting perceptions of progress, self-efficacy, and motivation (Schunk & Mullen, 2013). It makes transparent where the experience resonates and where it is not yet happening. Where there is content that is added to the framework in response to the prompts, or where there are gaps when thoughts are not yet known. This transparency can be a useful tool for meta-cognition and meta-learning as it enables the student to quite literally “see” where gaps in their thinking are or where their capacity to engage is yet to occur. Such processes inform student self-efficacy through their personal connection with how well they are managing a task (Krause, Bouchner, Duchesne, & McMaugh, 2010). This self-efficacy can build confidence, which is important when faced with challenges in learning or as teachers in practice.

Critical policy analysis also exposes the preservice teacher to issues and aspects that are important to them at a personal level via the analytic process. The connection of policy to potential self is reflective of a sense of future self as an early childhood teacher. This future self is one of possibilities and potentialities (Hamman, Gosselin, Romano, & Bunuan, 2010); one that involves the agentic elements of policy enactment. Agency-beliefs contain features of self-regulation, which comprises the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours a person held towards their achievement of personal goals (Zimmerman, 2002). Self-regulation draws on aspects of meta-cognition through awareness of self as a learner and in this context self as emerging teacher, as well as motivational forces to achieve goals (Calarco, 2011). Through the process of engaging critically with policy preservice teachers were exposed to the responsibilities that they hold in the enactment of policy and also the capacity to challenge and work with the tensions that are a part of such enactment. Criticality becomes one of actions and embodied practices and not a mere cognitive exercise alone.

Finally, critical thinking provides a means by which preservice teachers can enter the profession as political agents ready to make a positive difference in the world, ready to be agents of change through their capacity to critique the hegemonic discourses that constrain their sector and their profession (Hattam, 2020). Policy documents and policy enactment like critical thinking are a political act (Brookfield, 2012; Cardno, 2019). Through the use of the ADI framework, students showed that they could examine policy for bias, absent voices, and perspectives, and where tensions may arise to effectively enact policy. Critical engagement with policy analysis is aligned with democratic societies through the capacity to “interrogate the policy process, and the epistemological roots of policy work, examine the players involved in the policy process, and reveal policy constructions” (Diem & Young, 2015, p. 841). The examination of policy from a critical lens brought up the

challenges inherent within the early childhood sector in relation to its purpose and function, its place within the hegemonic discourses of education in general, and how it fits within the wider socio-political context. In Aotearoa, New Zealand, ECE has a troubled history which influences the present. The professional status of the sector and of early childhood teachers remains contentious and fragile (Manning, 2019). The capacity for early childhood teachers to show that they are critically aware and engaged supports their claims for professional status and the value of the sector and its contribution to society.

### Conclusion

This study used an opportunity within early childhood initial teacher education to critique the application of a framework to facilitate preservice teacher engagement in critical policy analysis. The use of the ADI framework enabled preservice teachers to have a template to guide them through the process of critical analysis. The use of the ADI also made transparent not only the process but also the complexities that this criticality involves. This opportunity for transparency is itself an act of critical pedagogy, as it brings an awareness to the learner as to their own points of challenge, insight, and opportunity for transformation. Paying particular attention to how we support our students in their critical thinking is an essential aspect of our role in higher education. A limitation of this study is that it did not provide a point of comparison as to critical thinking skills prior to use of the framework. In addition, this is an account of one application of the framework within one course of study. However, the benefit of the study is still of value and adds to the discourse of academic literacies by providing an account of supporting the scaffolding of critical policy analysis.

This study drew on an academic literacies approach to make connections to critical pedagogy and the examination of inequalities, power imbalances, and social justice that are required for critical policy analysis. Academic literacies theory provides a framework by which to examine the ways in which students are supported. In particular, the theory enables teacher educators to critically engage with and question their own practices in appreciation of the significance of power dynamics and supporting social justice. As teacher educators attending to academic literacies reinforces the need to attend to what we do and not just what the preservice early childhood teacher should and will hopefully do when they are in practice in an early childhood context. Conscientization therefore is as important to the teacher educator as it is to the preservice teacher.

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