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## Higher order reading skills and reader response theory: strategies for the classroom

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### Abstract

*South African learners' performance in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2006) assessment reinforced the need for reading instruction practices aimed at addressing the difficulties in language and reading in both the Foundation and Intermediate Phases, particularly comprehension. PIRLS (2006) highlights the areas of low achievement of South African learners by referring to strategies identified by current research as central to the learning of reading. South Africa lags behind in introducing these critical skills. We argued for the inclusion of an alternative reading programme to the phonics only approach currently and predominantly used in Foundation Phase. The study was lodged in a qualitative paradigm and embedded in action research. The analysis is framed by constructivist grounded theory. Qualitative data generated by the respondents' response journals were analysed using the constant comparative method. Theories that inform the analysis of this data, are Bourdieu's theory of habitus, Kohlberg's theory of moral development and Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills. The participants' were a non-exclusionary cohort of 58 third Graders.*

**Keywords:** Higher order skills, reader response, critical literacy, knowledge construction and meaning-making.

### Introduction

South African learners' performance in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2006) assessment reinforced the need for reading instruction practices aimed at addressing the difficulties in language and reading in both the Foundation and Intermediate Phases, particularly comprehension. PIRLS (2006) highlights the areas of low achievement of South African learners by referring to twelve reading skills and strategies identified by current research as central to the learning of reading. These skills are: knowing letters; knowing letter-sound relationships; reading words; reading isolated sentences; reading connected text;

identifying the main idea of text; explaining or supporting understanding of text ; comparing text with personal experience; comparing different texts; making predictions about what will happen next; making generalisations and inferences and describing the style and structure of text. South Africa lags behind in introducing these critical skills. We argued for the inclusion of an alternative reading programme to the phonics only approach currently and predominantly used in Foundation Phase. The study was lodged in a qualitative paradigm and embedded in action research. The analysis is framed by constructivist grounded theory. The qualitative data generated by the respondents' response journals were analysed using the constant comparative method. Theories that informed the analysis of this data are Bourdieu's theory of habitus, Kohlberg's theory of moral development and Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills. The participants' were a non-ex clusionary cohort of 58 third Graders. The sample was representative in terms of gender, language grouping- English, Afrikaans and Xhosa (Figure: 1) The Learning Centre at which the study was conducted, is a registered Non Profit Organisation which provides a holistic education to learners' from deprived areas. The teaching model employed is undergirded by an awareness of poverty's complex array of risk factors, and how it affects the school population in a multitude of ways. "Cognitive lags" Jensen (2005), are one of the primary factors, and is considered as an underpinning approach in the teaching model at the research site. Other aspects of this research focused on children's motivation to read. However for the purposes of this paper the focus is on higher order reading skills and how suitable children's literature can be employed to exploit strategies to increase these important reading skills in second language learners'.

Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.: Respondents' home language profile To ameliorate the language and literacy delays experienced by second language speakers, who are taught in a language other than their own, we must theoretically concede to the humanness within all children; to their individual uniqueness and abilities; acknowledge their diversity; to their richly complex lives, language and experiences; to their abilities as learners to negotiate daily among multiple epistemologies, languages, and contexts. In recognising the complexity of children's experiences, interventions in literacy and language delays can be scaffolded to suit the individual child. To achieve this, the focus should be on effective and holistic teaching practices and interventions to improve outcomes for children, bearing in mind the link between children's cognitive growth and teachers' classroom practice. Teaching practices should always lead to improved literacy outcomes in the early years of school (Brophy and Good 1986:328). Brophy and Good (1986) assert that effective teachers have a wide repertoire of teaching practices, which they are able to skilfully employ to suit the classroom context, their purposes and the needs of their students. The importance of teaching based on detailed knowledge of children's literacy needs, that is, practice based on informed decision making, has been seen as a principle of 'best practice' for literacy teaching (Mazzoli & Gambrell, 2003). The disparity in the reading experiences of children of varying skill may have many other consequences for their future reading and cognitive development. Less skilled readers' will therefore experience less rewarding

reading experiences, which ultimately will impact on the lack of reading motivation of a learner. According to Stanovich (1986) these consequences are reciprocal and exponential in nature. Accumulated over time – spiralling either upward or downward – they carry profound implications for a wide range of cognitive capabilities. As decoding skill develops and word recognition becomes more automatic, more general language skills, such as vocabulary, background knowledge, familiarity with complex syntactic structures, etc., become more apparent as the limiting factors on reading ability (Chall, 1983; Sticht, 1979). Thus, reading for meaning is hindered; unrewarding reading experiences multiply; and practice is avoided or merely tolerated without real cognitive engagement. Proponents of critical literacy focus on the building of student capacity to analyse and criticise the texts and ideologies of contemporary work and culture (Luke, 1994: 44). They recognise that schools are implicated in the distribution and classification of knowledge. They shape and select what texts are studied and which classroom practices preferred, which work together to portray the world and position readers in a particular way. Critical literacy is strongly connected to poststructuralist understandings of language as socially constructed, and to where meanings in texts change in different times and places, and as they are read by readers in different circumstances (Misson & Morgan, 2006:6). Because of our interest in critical reading skills, including comprehension, we have chosen to foreground critical literacy. This article further discusses the dimensions of reader response theory, also known as transactional theory, that illuminate the relationship between readers and texts as they co-construct understandings of texts. In her seminal work Rosenblatt (1986) expounds on the dynamic nature of transactions between reader and text and defines the process as a 'reciprocal, mutually defining relationship.' In the light of the relationship between critical literacy and reader response theory, the focussing question guiding the research into was: How does the practice of a reader response approach develop critical literacy and higher order skills: cognition, knowledge construction and meaning making?

## **Literature review**

Critical literacy is an ambiguous term. Green (2001) highlights a dichotomous view: to some researchers it means higher order thinking skills, including the ability to analyze and synthesize what one has read and communicate its meaning to others; some argue that unless we take a stance where we go beyond mere analysis, synthesis and transformation- we are not critically literate. There is a call for social and political criticism. If our students are to be critically literate, in the words of Freire (1970:6-65) they must be able to read the words and the world. This means that he encourages a broader view of reading that goes “beyond reading the word”. Freire proposes a system in which students become more socially aware through critique of multiple forms of injustice. This awareness cannot be achieved if students are not given the opportunity to explore and construct knowledge. Freire adds a component of social and political activism to his definition of critical literacy (1970:53). Gee’s (2001) conception of critical literacy, also includes a personal component, namely how the information influences the reader. It is clear that critical literacy indicates a level of literacy that involves reading between and beyond the lines of print.

With changing conceptions of literacy, the onus is on the educator to help students to become critically literate. What then is the potential application of critical literacy in the classroom for the child reader in Grade 3? How can these skills be employed so that the reader looks beyond the text? Looking beyond the text refers to dimensions of hidden agendas and power groups and their relationships: Critical literacy views readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text's message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors (McLaughlin & De Voogd, 2004:14). According to McDaniel (2006:5) critical literacy transcends conventional notions of reading and has at its core a focus on power - Who has it? How is it being used in hidden or invisible ways? Cervetti et al. (2001) state that when readers take this stance towards power, they develop a critical consciousness, fostering a search for justice and equity by reading the meaning behind the text. Conducting lessons that foster critical literacy requires that teachers explicitly confront their own beliefs and assumptions about the role of activities, discourse and power within the classrooms. Tobin (2000) further suggests that teachers must also be prepared to provide space for students to express the complex way in which we respond to texts, even in the Foundation Phase. Educational theorists from a range of academic paradigms however, have expressed concern regarding students' abilities to think critically about issues (Ennis, 1997; Freire, 1982; Giroux, 1988; Langer & Applebee, 1978; Marzano, 1991). Traditionally, schools have taught reading and writing in a top-down fashion in that teachers act as experts and impart knowledge to students. This transmission model of education has been critiqued, because it forces students to take passive roles as consumers (often uncritical ones) of information (Freire, 1970). There appears to be a relationship in research literature between learning and critical thinking. Mason (2008:1) proposes that students should be encouraged to ask critical questions if they are to learn and think. Ennis (1996) defends a conception of critical thinking as based primarily in particular skills, such as observing, inferring, generalizing, reasoning, and evaluating. He further maintains that skills associated with critical thinking can be learned independently of specific disciplines and can be transferred from one domain to another. Critical thinking is broadly seen as the kind of logical thinking that helps us to analyze and make sense of, or interpret, all forms of situations or information so that the conclusions we draw from our interpretations are sound. It is pervasive and is seen as vital to any developed life since it entails "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe and do" (Ennis, 1987:10).

Shannon (1995: 83) explains how critical perspectives embed literacy in social practice:

Critical perspectives push the definition of literacy beyond traditional decoding or encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of text or society until it becomes a means for understanding one's own history and culture, to recognize connections between one's life, and the social structure, to believe that change in one's life, and the lives of others and society are possible as well as desirable, and to act on this new knowledge in order to foster equal and just participation in all the decisions that affect and control our lives. Critical literacy in the

classroom is seen by Kretoivics (1985:51) as providing students not merely with functional skills, but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices. Furthermore, critical literacy can stress the need for students to develop a collective vision of what it might be like to live in the best of all societies and how such a vision might be made practical. Louise Rosenblatt has been particularly influential in framing how researchers and practitioners approach the interaction of children with literature. Rosenblatt speaks about immersion in transactional reading of literature as aesthetic reading. Aesthetic reading according to Rosenblatt (1994: 24) focuses on “what we are seeing and feeling and thinking, on what is aroused within us by the sound of the words, and by what they point to in the human and natural world.”

According to her the reader brings his/her own experiences and feelings to the text, therefore the literary experience can be very personal. From a cognitivist and socio-cultural perspective, reading comprehension is extracting and constructing meaning from text. It entails three elements: the reader, the text and the activity. These elements are highly interactive and situated within a broad socio-cultural context that affects them and the nature of their interactions (Sweet & Snow, 2003). Many works on comprehension underline the active involvement of the reader in creating meaning from text (Pressley 2000; Pressley & Afflerback, 1995).

For example, Irwin (1986) categorizes five main types of interacting reading processes, from bottom-up micro- processes – such as decoding – to integration, macro-processes, elaboration and meta-cognition. Langer (1990) characterizes literary reading as “envisionment building” and proposes that readers approach reading by “being out and stepping into” a text, then “being in and moving through.” This activity is sometimes interrupted by “stepping out and rethinking” what one already knows. Finally, readers have the opportunity to “step out and objectify” the experience of reading. Shaped by private and social contexts, one’s interpretations are never stagnant and result from the simultaneous interaction of many reading stances. Rosenblatt (1991) distinguishes two basic approaches to a text, to be situated on a continuum: an aesthetic one, defined as primarily “private”, and an efferent one, defined as “public.” In adopting this latter reading stance, readers are concerned with gathering information to use in some manner in the real world – with knowledge, facts, and eventually the products of reading. Shine and Roser (1999) have investigated children's spontaneous responses during the reading of fiction books (fantasy and realism), information, and poetry books. Nine children participated in a small-group situation in which the adult refrained from directing the conversation. In response to the information books, children adopted an information stance, sharing their knowledge about the topic and associating texts with their own lives. With fantasy fiction books, children were more engaged; they tried to interpret the characters' emotions and understand the whole story line. Literary theorists view literature reading essentially as an act of rereading, analysis and discourse production – a discourse which asks the readers to elaborate and rigorously support their thoughts (Cornis-Pope, 2000; Daunay, 1999). Such a view leads students to adopt a predominantly efferent stance in literature classes. At the other extreme of the continuum, an

aesthetic stance accords “more attention to the penumbra of private feelings, attitudes, sensations and ideas” (Rosenblatt, 1994:184). As such, reading literature is considered as a virtual lived - through experience, a transactional process, a unique and momentary event occurring between a reader, a text and a context. Rosenblatt, in considering these different reading stances, argues that “we do not have the cognitive, the referential, the factual, the analytic, the abstract on the one side and the affective, the emotive, the sensuous, on the other. Instead, both aspects of meaning – which might be termed the public and the private – are always present in our transactions”. Rosenblatt's, views on the aesthetic stance, as opposed to the efferent or more functional one, is the most effective way to read fiction and poetry and “the notion that children must ‘understand’ the text cognitively, efferently, before it can be responded to aesthetically is a rationalization that must be rejected” (Rosenblatt, 1982: 273). There is typically, however, a reluctance on the part of secondary teachers to consider this ‘private’ or aesthetic side of interpretation. Too often, it is treated as an optional portion of the lesson to be quickly and informally discussed at the end of class. Indeed, primary educators know that young readers participating in literature circles appear to feel more comfortable expressing personal and tentative thoughts (McMahon, 1992; Goatley et al. 1995; Alvermann et al., 1996). Rosenblatt posits that the relationship between readers and text is a dynamic, ever-changing transaction (Clark 1984:58-70, Meichenbaum 1985: 407-426). Gambrell (1996:10) states that “when children read, they activate their capacity for imagination, for creative and critical thinking, for empathy”. World-making, childhood events, children's perceptions of the world, children's dreams and fantasies can become part of the literacy environment made and shaped for and with children through the use of literature and the uses to which literature is put in the context of learning (Barrs & Cork:2001). Meek (2001:20) further underpins this notion of “world-making” and talks about competent authors ”making worlds for children to enter and explore, where they meet the deep matters of meaning making; being and becoming, love and loss, doubt and despair, psychological realities presented as people and events“. Rosenblatt (1938/1982:290-291) concludes: ”When there is active participation in literature - the reader living through, reflecting on, and criticizing his [sic] own responses to text - there will be many kinds of benefits. We can call this growth in ability to share discriminatingly in the possibilities of language as it is used in literature”. But this means also the development of the imagination: the ability to escape from the limitations of time, place and environment, the capacity to envisage alternatives in ways of life and in moral and social choices, sensitivity to thought and feeling and needs of other personalities. Children's writing was also found to be more creative, meaningful and natural when a literature - based programme was followed (Rosenblatt, 1995). When considering the meaning that any individual attributes to a text, it is important to note that the text is not interpreted alone, but in terms of the context in which it is read. According to Rosenblatt (1995: 175) literature should be personally experienced because it “may result in increased social sensitivity”, encouraging individuals to become more empathetic toward others and to develop a greater sense of responsibility for their own behaviours. “This increased ability to imagine the human implications of any situation is just as important for the individual in his broader political and social relationships (Rosenblatt, 1995). “Many political

blunders or social injustices seem to be the result not so much of maliciousness or conscious cruelty as of the inability of citizens to translate into human terms the laws or political platforms they support. A democratic society, whose institutions and political and economic procedures are constantly being developed and remoulded, needs citizens with the imagination to see what political doctrines mean for human beings” (Rosenblatt 1995:176). From the early days of the development of theory and research on response, studies have focused on (a) text, or how various texts affect response; (b) readers, or how experiences and attitudes situated in readers affect response; and (c) the context in which response is generated. These ways of discussing literature and response remain with us today (Galda, Ash, & Cullinan, 2000). In responding to texts at the level of activity, students learn to go beyond the usual pedagogical focus on inferring characters’ acts or dialogue (what is the character doing or saying), beliefs (what do characters believe about each other), and goals and motivations (what is the character trying to accomplish and why) to interpret and contextualize characters’ actions or dialogue as involving various social practices within activities (Beach, 2000). engaging in shared rituals, or (i) constructing / sharing knowledge. By inferring these social practices, students are interpreting how characters’ actions or dialogue function or serve as social agendas (Mosenthal, 1998) designed to fulfil the objects or motives driving activity systems. As Gee (2000) noted, people (and characters) are recognized as having certain agendas or being certain kinds of persons through their uses of language or discourses.

## **Strategies for the classroom**

Unless research transitions and translates from theory into practice its value remains underutilized for the learner in the classroom. Our aim was to translate aspects of this theory into strategies for a reading programme to support the cognitive development and engagement of readers, and to track its impact by applying an action research model.

### **Shared reading as an instructional approach**

Holdaway (1997) developed a procedure known as “shared book experience”. Shared reading provides very strong support for learners. It allows for the modelling of real reading and accounts for the ways in which “natural readers” have learned to read by being read to, reading along with an adult and ultimately reading on their own. “Shared reading is a good way to immerse students in literature without worrying about the reading level of the story...” Cooper (1993:51). Young emerging readers, linguistically and culturally different readers, and reluctant readers feel more success through shared reading than when they struggle to read the text by themselves (Trachtenburg & Ferruggia, 1989; Wicklund, 1989). The shared reading strategy involved three parts: read aloud, read along and read alone. This strategy is very flexible and can be used for learners who need stronger scaffolding to help them construct meaning (Cooper 1993:304-305). Routman (1991:33) defines shared reading as any rewarding reading situation in which a learner or group of learners sees the text, observes an expert (usually the teacher) reading it with fluency and expression, and is invited to read along. The learner is in the role of receiving support, and

the teacher-expert accepts and encourages all efforts and approximations the learner (the novice) makes. Each reading situation is a relaxed, social one, with emphasis on enjoyment and appreciation of the stories, songs, rhymes, chants, raps and poems. This approach allows learners to hear fluent oral reading, while being introduced to and discussing literature they would not otherwise be able to read independently. Allen (2002) believes that shared reading texts need to have certain characteristics: they should invite personal connections, should “create intense emotional experiences for the reader, and should expand the world of the reader.” Reading aloud has many advantages in addition to modelling fluent reading: It builds background knowledge, exposes students to a wide variety of genres, makes reading pleasurable, motivates students to read independently, guides students in choosing books, develops higher-level thinking skills, improves listening skills, connects books to students’ lives, teaches elements of literature, leads students in meaningful discussions, teaches students effective strategies, and ideally will help lead students to lifelong love of reading (Trelease, 2001). The literature was carefully chosen for its high quality of language and illustrations and often included rereading of favourite stories and poems. Following shared reading, students had opportunities to reread the literature independently (Routman, 1991: 33). Shared storybook reading is viewed as particularly powerful because it provides an interactive context that is contextualized, authentic, meaningful, interesting, and motivating to the preschool child (Watkins & Bunce, 1996).

## **Research Method**

The following instruments were employed for data collection in this qualitative research study to ensure data triangulation. These varied data sources provided opportunities for convergence and triangulation regarding assertions and the development of categories (Goetz & LeCompte 1984, Miles & Huberman, 1994). The approach to data collection was mainly qualitative, the quantitative component was used to support the validity of the data. The primary data sources comprised the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS), The Burt Word Recognition Test and the Response Journals of the respondents. Supplementary data was also collected from a comprehension test adapted from PIRLS 2006. The survey that was administered is known as The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS) and was developed by McKenna and Kear (1990). This normed instrument was specifically designed to measure the attitude of primary school learners towards reading. The reason for including this survey is that it was used to make initial conjecture about the reading attitudes of the learners who were reading below grade level before the intervention programme. This survey also provided a convenient group profile and it was a means of monitoring the attitudinal impact of the shared reading programme. A supplementary comprehension test (PIRLS 2006) was administered after the intervention programme. This post test was included in order to obtain an objective perspective on whether respondents’ higher order thinking skills could be discerned in their discourse. The comprehension test (The Upside Down Mice, Dahl, 1981) is based on the aspects of reading literacy which were assessed in PIRLS (2006) namely



- Purposes for reading
- Processes of comprehension

These aspects formed the basis for the written test of reading comprehension. In literary reading, the reader engages with the text to become involved in imagined events, settings, actions, consequences, characters, atmosphere, feelings and ideas. The main genre of literary texts when reading for literary experience in PIRLS (2006) assessments is narrative fiction. The Burt Word Recognition Test was used to determine the reading baselines of each of the three ability groups before and after the shared reading intervention literature-based reading programme. The reading process is a complex one and the Burt Word Recognition Test is not an indicator of reading age, but is used in conjunction with other information. However, it allows teachers to assess a child's reading achievement to aid decisions about appropriate teaching and reading materials and instructional groupings.

### **Response journals**

Qualitative data was collected from the journal entries of the 58 3rd Grade respondents' in the sample. The learners' responses provided the narrative and qualitative data on their literacy progress. Writing is a critical component of any reading programme. They wrote and reflected on their reading, connecting themselves personally with the texts, which enhances comprehension and interpretive skills. They also wrote and reflected on their use of reading strategies, thus enhancing their critical thinking and meta-cognitive skills. The data that was collected focused on the learners' responses to the notions of aesthetic reading, efferent reading and "meaning making".

The aim of these response journals was to gain insight into how the child reader responds to and interprets literature. "When readers read literature, their personal memories, feelings, and thought associations may be evoked by the text". This perspective on reading is also known as reader response theory (Rosenblatt 1938, 1978). Martinez and Roser (1991: 652) refer to classrooms where responses to literature thrive. These classrooms seem to be characterized by teachers' valuing of responses as the crux of literacy growth. Valuing of responses in the classroom is evident when teachers (a) provide opportunities for response, (b) provide response models, and (c) receive children's responses (in all their diversity). Permitting students to read fiction and poetry aesthetically enhances the goal of providing children with pleasurable experiences with literature (DeGroff & Galda 1992). Using quality children's literature is fundamental in the process of individual response and creative interpretation (Meek 2001). Martin and Leather (1994:39) support this view when they state that books become something different for each reader and children respond to different literature in different ways. The context encourages children to verbalize their various interpretations while valuing the insights and understanding that peers offer (King 2001: 35). Selected genres of children's literature were included in the children's literature-based reading intervention programme:

- Fantasy: Where The Wild Things Are (Maurice Sendak, 1963).
- Fantasy: The Magic Paint Brush (Julia Donaldson, 2003).
- Folk tale: The Spoiled Child (1994, World folk tales).
- Fairy tale: The Three Little Pigs (Jon Scieszka, 1989).
- Modern fantasy: The Tunnel (Anthony Browne, 1989).
- High Fantasy: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe (C. S. Lewis, 1950).
- Folk tale: The Genie (translated Lang, A (1898 (From Arabian Nights).
- Traditional: The Best Thing In The World- (Unknown, from Dolche list).
- Fantasy: Charlie And The Chocolate Factory ( Roald Dahl, 1964).

Below are examples of summaries of two stories and the participants' responses. The story of The Spoiled Child (1994) helped the respondents see the consequence of disobedience. This relates to stage 1: Obedience and punishment in Kohlberg's (1981) theory of stages of moral development. In the recorded discussion respondents referred to the biblical aphorism derived from II Thessalonians 3:10, "He who does not work, neither shall he eat." The majority of respondents were familiar with this verse as it was often used in the home. Respondents had strong feelings about obeying God's word. Learners were introduced to setting in the context of the narrative being read as well as literary elements like sequencing and prediction.

Question: What did you like about the story?

Respondent: 12: I liked it when Galinka started to work and then she was given something to eat.

Respondent: 13: When the father said, if you don't clean the house, you will not eat or get bread.

Respondent: 14: I like it when you must work for your bread.

Respondent: 15: I liked the part when Galinka rolled up her sleeves and worked. Question: What did you not like about the story?

Respondent: 16: I did not like it when she did not want to clean or light the fire. Respondent: 17: I did not like it when she was lazy.

In The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe C.S. Lewis, (1950). The responses centred on themes of magic, fantasy and imagination. Many respondents referred to togetherness of family, feeling safe and being free to explore and having the right to remain in a magical place like Narnia as well as experiences of power and escape from limits of time and place. They had strong views on Edmund's betrayal of his siblings. Forgiveness was the right thing to do. "If God is able to forgive us, then we should do likewise". The majority of respondents were prepared to forgive Edmund for his lies and betrayal, because they felt that the bond of family was important no

matter the transgression. Issues of morality and ethics were fore-grounded when they questioned Edward's betrayal and the White Witch's motives. These responses were also interspersed with philosophical diversions.

Task: Pretend that you are Edmund. Write a letter to your siblings and ask them to forgive you for what you have done.

Respondent: 20: I am sorry for what I have done. Lying was not the right thing to do.

Respondent: 21: I am so sorry; I was selfish and should be more respectful.

Respondent: 22: I am very sorry for lying to you and betraying you. I know now that I was only thinking of myself. I hope that you forgive me. Reader-response theory served as the framework used to analyse the journals. The rich data collected from the respondents in their journals led to employ a grounded theory approach. The use of the constructivist paradigm, and particularly constructivist grounded theory, was the appropriate approach for grounding the findings of response journals in the real life engagement of the context of the respondents. The use of grounded theory method provides a flexible and iterative process for dealing with multiple and conflicting meanings, interpretations and constructions that emanate from the individual's real world engagement with information. Researchers seek to analyse how research participants construct their lives (Charmaz, 2003: 69). "In seeking respondent's meanings, we must go further than surface meanings or presumed meanings. A constructivist approach necessitates a relationship with respondents in which they can cast their stories in their terms" (Charmaz, 2003: 525). In understanding the analysis of the response journals it is necessary to define what constitutes a response. Purves and Beach (1972: 178) explain that "responses consist of cognition, perception, and some emotional or attitudinal reaction; it involves predispositions; it changes during the course of reading; and it might result in modification of concepts, attitudes or feelings." In analysing the written responses of the respondents in this study it was clear that their lived experiences and social contexts were reflected in their responses. All the learners enjoyed listening to the selected children's literature and contributed to the discussions in an animated manner. This showed that the social context was a highly salient factor in the children's responses to literature. Analysing children's verbal responses qualitatively, captured the richness and complexity of the children's work. Higher order thinking was reflected when they compared the text to personal experience, making predictions, generalisations and inferencing. The majority of the respondents had a very clear understanding of the literary elements such as the characters and their importance in the story, the setting, plot and events. After writing their responses to the first story in their journals, and based on our observations, and the written responses in their journals, we could scaffold the prompts for each of the successive stories that followed. In the practice of scaffolding the teacher extends children's learning through modelling, modifying and correcting, and is related to the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996). It involves demonstrations and modelling, such as when teachers say aloud what they are thinking while they are reading and writing in order to make clear the 'cognitive processes used by skilled readers and writers' (Strickland, 2002: 80). During the reading sessions participants

were asked what the story was about, if this was difficult for some participants, then they were prompted to retell the story in their own words, they were more confident when asked to retell. Initially the questions focused on literary elements like the title, setting, characters, climax, problem and solution in the story. Subsequent prompts included questions on text-to-self. In the story of Narnia: The Lion, the witch and the wardrobe, participants were asked to explain what they thought about the betrayal of one of the siblings. This question elicited discussions around morality and virtuous behaviour. The response prompts were open-ended prompts that helped to move the respondents from initial retellings of stories and summaries to more analytical responses and greater emotional involvements. Martinez and Roser (2002) are of the view that response prompts move readers from writing in their journals to discussing their responses, fostering richer classroom discussion. Much of the data collected through the response journals revealed the respondents' assumptions about the world.

## Conclusions

The aim of this research overall was to engage the child reader in all aspects of children's literature, and through the reading intervention programme, ignite their thought processes and responses and guide them to critical enquiry and higher order thinking. During the children's literature-based reading intervention programme we tried to understand the internal dynamic of the classroom activity in all its complexity, according to a particular teaching approach, which was a shared reading approach, and within a natural classroom environment. Allowing the respondents to engage in open dialogue within the framework of the shared reading activity, confirmed that children have the capacity for complex thinking at an earlier age than we credit them for. The findings further revealed that;

- Prodigious amounts of vocabulary support fluency and comprehension.
- A strong relationship exists between reading motivation and academic achievement.
- The early introduction of literary reading skills has a significant impact on higher order reading ability.
- The respondents' transaction with text reflected their personal meaning making, their cultural and family habitus as well as their levels of moral reasoning.

This study has shown that it is possible for innovative teachers to develop children's literacy abilities through the implementation of a literature based approach in reading in Grade 3; and the understanding and use of reader response as a methodological approach. It acknowledges the roles of the learner, the educator and the school in the attainment of literacy. It is imperative that teachers make available quality fiction and informational literature for their students. The criteria for good children's literature varies, but Bishop (1992:49) suggests that it should be "...well written, tell a good story, have strong characterization, and offer a worthwhile theme or themes children could be expected to understand." All literature shared in the classroom should meet

these criteria. The benefits of introducing a children's literature reading programme are far reaching for learners, enabling them to acquire the skills needed to become independent, confident lifelong readers, whose reading skills will allow them to participate in society and the academic world. It could therefore be concluded that emotional- aesthetic- experience drives cognition and therefore comprehension in young readers'. This is the area of greatest weakness in the South African PIRLS (2006) results. It hugely emphasises the importance of developing comprehension and critical thinking. Conclusions that have emerged from the research of the Grade 3 literature-based reading programme and, in the light of the reflection, propose recommendations for implementing literature based development of higher order reading skills. While the debate continues about South African learners' poor literacy and reading skills, much can be done to reverse this situation. A positive shift towards a more innovative instructional approach or methodology very often requires only enthusiasm by the educator and the willingness to embrace it. The Balanced Approach as proposed by the WCED (2006) has leanings towards including children's literature, when mention is made of 'real books.' The current curriculum, (NCS, 2002) in South Africa demands that teachers use constructivist methods of teaching and learning, which means that when using this learner-centered approach it stimulates higher levels of thinking, encourages articulation of thinking, helps students remember, allows students to make connections and see different perspectives, as well as promoting deeper understanding. Selecting appropriate literature allows children to interpret and understand and make connections with the text and connect their own life experiences to the text. Consequently, constructivist activities in the classroom that focus on speaking and listening promote not only constructivist thought but also important connections between teacher and students. Problem-solving, higher-order thinking skills and deep understanding are emphasized (Honebein, 1996: 17- 24). Social engagement is an integral component of constructivist-based instruction. It is this deeper level of understanding that must be promoted via a change in teaching strategies (Tovani, 2004). From a constructivist perspective where the learner is perceived as meaning-maker, teacher-centered, text- centered and skills-oriented approaches to literature instruction are replaced by more learner-centered approaches where processes of understanding are emphasized. The learner-centeredness of a constructivist classroom is clearly apparent in a reader response approach to literature. These literary discursive practices promote constructivist thought. Another quality of a constructivist class is its interactive nature, which allows the learner to construct meaning drawing on their own "lived –worlds" to connect with text. That a chasm exists between the intended curriculum and the implemented curriculum must be acknowledged. It is a well – known phenomenon in educational literature and research that there is usually a significant discrepancy between the intended, and implemented and attained curriculum. The implementation is influenced by the beliefs, attitudes, training and experiences of teachers who are ultimately responsible for defining and delivering the curriculum at classroom level (Hargreaves, 1989; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977). In using this literature-based approach, whether to augment or replace the basal approach, the literature or reading teacher can implement appropriate strategies that will give learners an opportunity to react personally, reflect

and respond to literature. The benefits for integrating and using the reader-response literary theories as a suitable base for instructional focus on reading is valuable, because the strategies are compatible with Piagetian and social constructivist theories of learning and development as outlined in the literature review. Goforth (1998:43) highlights the value of Transactional Theory, which also forms the framework for the intervention reading programme in this study. The authors' are of the view, that as teachers' deepen their understanding of constructivist approaches and methods in teaching and learning, this proposed literature-based reading programme will provide the necessary focus and impetus to stimulate higher order reading skills and activities for second language learners,' ameliorating language and literacy delays.

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