

**READING IDENTITIES: A CASE STUDY OF GRADE 8 LEARNERS'  
INTERACTIONS IN A READING CLUB**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study offers an account of reading clubs as a literacy intervention in a grade 8 English class at a former 'Coloured' high school in South Africa. Using Margaret Archer's social realist methodology, it examines different practices of 'reading' used by learners in talking and writing about text.

Archer's analytical dualism and morphogenetic model provided an explanatory framework for this study. Analytical dualism allows for the separation of the parts (structural and cultural elements) from the people (the grade 8 learners) so as to analyse the interplay between structure and culture. The morphogenetic model recognises that antecedent structures predate this, and any study but that through the exercise of agency, morphogenesis, in the form of structural elaboration or morphostasis in the form of continuity, may occur.

This study used a New Literacies perspective based on an ideological model of literacy which recognises many different literacies, in addition to dominant school literacies. Learners' talk about books as well as personal journal writing provided an insight into what cultural mechanisms and powers children bring to the reading of novels. Understandings of discourses as well as of Gee's (1990; 2008) construct of Discourse provided a framework for examining learners' identities and shifts as readers.

The data in this study, which is presented through a series of vignettes, found that grade 8 learners use many different experiences and draw on different discourses when making sense of texts. Through the separation of the structural and cultural components, this research could explore how reading clubs as structures enabled learners to access different discourses from the domain of culture. Through the process and engagement in the reading clubs, following Gee (2000b), learners were attributed affinity, discursal and institutional identities as readers.

It was found, in the course of the study, that providing a safe space, scaffolding, multiple opportunities to practice and a variety of reading material, helped learners to access and appropriate dominant literacies. In addition, learners need a repertoire of

literacy practices to draw from as successful reading needs flexibility and adaptability. Reading and writing inform each other and through gradual induction into literary writing, learners began to appropriate and approximate dominant literacy practices.

Following others who have contributed to the field of New Literacy Studies (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Gee 1990; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996), this study would suggest that literacies of traditionally underserved communities should not be considered in deficit terms. Instead these need to be understood as resources for negotiating meaning making and as tools or mechanisms to access dominant discourse practices. In addition the resilience and competition from Discourses of popular culture need to be recognised and developed as tools to access school literacies.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANAs	Annual National Assessments
BICS	Basic Interpersonal Communication Strategies (Cummins)
CALP	Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency
CAPS	Curriculum and Policy Statement
CEPs	Cultural Emergent Properties (Archer, 1995)
DoE	Department Of Education
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
LoLT	Language of Learning and Teaching
NBTs	National Benchmark Tests
RNCS	Revised National Curriculum Statement
OBE	Outcomes Based Education
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
SGBs	School Governing Bodies
SEPs	Structural Emergent Properties

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*“The establishment of a successful social practice is dependent upon adaptive ingenuity of reflexive subjects”*

(Archer, 2007c: 10).

### 1.1 Background

This study focuses on reading in a grade 8 English classroom which forms part of a school and community located in a former “Coloured” area of a South African coastal city. It is a study of an educational intervention underpinned by critical and social realism. It developed from many concerns. Teachers at this school were concerned that their grade 8 learners ‘couldn’t read’. This was followed by an invitation to me – a language lecturer, at a local university and former high school English teacher – to work more closely with grade 8 learners over successive years in the hope that I would achieve a deeper, more nuanced understanding of what ‘reading’ was for the learners in their school contexts. The grade 8 learners came from between seven and twelve different feeder schools and so brought an array of primary school ‘reading’ practices with them to high school. I was aware that school practices value certain literacies above others (Street, 1984; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983) and while these school practices may be challenged as elitist or exclusionary, which they are, denying learners access to these practices further excludes them. I was concerned about the prospects for learners who ‘can’t read’ or, who are perceived to be unable to cope with the reading practices in high schools. I was also concerned that learners did not have access to the print literacies valued in schools or a supportive environment in which to respond to these or sufficient opportunities to engage with a range of print. And so I went to school.

Claims that learners entering high school ‘couldn’t read’ should not be surprising considering the larger educational backdrop. National and international tests like Annual National Assessments, (ANAs) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, (PIRLS), have shown that our learners do not do well on their measures of academic performance. Janks (2011) shows how the misalignment

between PIRLS and school reading practices are compounded by changes in the language of instruction, known as LoLT. In the report on the PIRLS 2006 tests, Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Du Toit, Scherman and Archer (2008) show how particular strategies for reading are only taught towards the end of Foundation Phase, or not at all, so that in writing the test, South African learners had not practiced some of the reading strategies which PIRLS drew on. Within the Foundation Phase it would seem that decoding is the main focus but still, after four years of schooling, the test found that “almost half of the learners tested in English and Afrikaans and more than 80% of learners tested in African languages, have not attained ‘basic reading skills and strategies’” (Ibid: 27). The learners in the grade 8 class, that was the focus of this study in 2011, were not part of the cohort tested in PIRLS 2006 (who would have been in grades 9 and 10 in 2011), but they would have had similar experiences of reading and literacy at primary school.

Within our current education dispensation, reading texts is used as a gatekeeping device, marking transitions between secondary and tertiary educational contexts in the form of National Benchmark Tests<sup>1</sup> (NBTs) or entrance tests, as well as within schools with comprehension tests and other assessments leading to the final Matriculation examinations. In fact much of what happens in education is driven by assessment and while this may serve a developmental or diagnostic role, for many teachers, and student teachers, assessment is about marks. It is summative. More importantly school assessments draw on specific, school-based literacy practices. Matriculation results, as well as those in ANAs and PIRLS, are seen often as evidence of education failure. These results have added to the media portrayal of a ‘literacy crisis’ – similar to Gee’s (2008) concern with portrayals of deteriorating literacy levels in the United States.

## **1.2 New Literacy Studies**

In exploring these literacy crises, Gee (2008) questions the origins, and in fact the truth, of this ‘crisis’ by elaborating on what is meant by literacy. For Gee, literacy is more than ‘the ability to read and write’ which implies a decontextualized skill: instead it is a way of reading which one acquires by being immersed or apprenticed

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<sup>1</sup> NBTs are National Benchmark Tests which many universities require prospective first year students to complete, in addition to writing Matriculation examinations.

as a member of a social practice wherein people not only read texts of this type in this way, but also talk about such texts in certain ways, hold certain attitudes and values about them, and socially interact over them in certain ways (Gee: 44).

Thus it is interwoven into the setting in which it occurs, whether it be churches, homes, banks or schools. This is a sociocultural approach to literacy which recognises that literacy is practised in different ways, resulting in multiple literacies, or ways of using understanding and interacting with texts. The recognition that literacy is used for different purposes within communities has been termed the *ideological* model (Street, 1984). Street challenges the view that literacy will automatically confer advantages for its proponents, and instead, draws on a range of research to illustrate how practices of reading and writing are used for different purposes within communities. This recognition that literacies are linked to ideologies, or belief systems, together with social values, presents an alternative to the *autonomous* model. New literacy theorists, including Heath (1983) Scollon and Scollon (1981) Street (1984; 1995) and Gee (2008) base their understanding of literacy on how it is used and conclude that there are multiple practices of literacy, both inside and outside school , each with multiple effects.

The ideological model thus offers an alternative understanding of why ‘our grade 8 learners can’t read’ as what learners were doing with texts in grade 8 was drawing on an array of approaches to text, with particular “patterns of language” (Cazden, 2001). Learners had mastered many literacies but maybe not schooled literacies. If learners were to shift to what was required in high school, they needed many opportunities to engage with print and see themselves as successful learners. In particular, I was concerned, as a former high school English teacher, that the grade 8 learners would get many opportunities to read extended texts like novels. Literature forms a large component of the English curriculum in the higher grades which justified my concern for the practice of reading books.

### **1.3 Context of the study**

As mentioned earlier this study grew from an authentic response to challenges faced by grade 8 readers at a local high school. I was familiar with the PIRLS reports on the state of reading at grades 4 and 5 and knew how our learners compared with

those in other countries and how reading levels in the Eastern Cape compared with those in other South African provinces. While PIRLS provided a broad picture of reading problems, I wanted to develop a more in-depth understanding of learners' experiences of reading. Like Cliff Hodges (2012: 9), I have found that case studies which offered "finely grained accounts of different young people as readers" provided different understandings of the literacy experience. While young South African readers were being presented in such bad light, I wanted their voices to be heard and to better understand their experiences of reading books. So the research gaze narrows its focus on to a particular grade 8 class in a traditionally less-advantaged school. What 'less-advantaged' meant as far as reading novels was concerned, was a dearth of books. But there was a library that had been locked for many years that contained five to six copies of different graded readers, or simplified stories, which were sufficient in total for the grade 8 class. Case studies can address "matters of value, power and local detail" (Erickson, 2011: 53) and can be sites of what Flyvberg (2001) calls 'phronesis' which is "action-orientated knowledge of a local social ecosystem" (Erickson, 2011: 53). So this study became a case study of reading within a specific class and school.

Informed by the ideological model I was interested in the *practice* of reading novels, and the particular discourses that might underpin this, rather than the *teaching* of novels. I was also interested in the grade 8s' experiences of reading at primary school as surfacing these understandings might go some in way to addressing the perceived gap between different primary and high school 'ways of reading' as well as those in the community. As I wanted to work particularly with the grade 8s themselves, I wanted an intervention that would be enjoyable and rewarding so that in itself it would encourage learners in reading novels. In describing family literacy practices, Heath characterises them as offering "social intimacy, laughter, fulfillment of curiosity, and contemplation of real and imagined worlds" (Heath, 2010: 38). As a specific literacy, reading novels could offer similar rewards, especially if the context was smaller groups, which offered safe spaces in which to share a reading experience. The concept of a reading club, similar to the book clubs described by McMahon and Raphael (1997) would offer sites for independent reading as well as opportunities to read multiple books as sets of readers circulated through the class.

## **1.4 Research question**

If, as Bhaskar (1998) asserts, reasons can be causes, then my interest in how grade 8 learners would respond to discussing books in reading clubs, was the reason for this research. The following research question became central to my thinking and working with the learners and to my understanding of the data:

How can a reading club contribute to shifts in reading identities among grade 8 learners?

In answering this question I was interested in:

1. What discourses did learners draw on in the reading clubs?
2. How did the structure of the reading clubs contribute to shifts in reading identity?

As I will show later, these questions were informed by a methodological framework developed for the research which drew on Bhaskar's (1978; 1998) critical realism and Archer's (1995, 2000) social realism.

## **1.5 Participants**

The grade 8 learners were participants in my research. As participants they worked together with me in developing reading clubs and sharing their thinking along the way. Therefore this study does not position the learners as fixed subjects of research who are knowable, but rather as shifting and unknowable (Pillow, 2003), whose identities are constructed through actions and interactions (McMahon & Raphael, 1997) and who, in response to different contexts and conditions, engage with secondary Discourses (Gee, 2008). As such the learners were actively engaged in this study, so change in their thinking and knowing and 'being' was part of the process. As participants, their voices are critical to understanding how the reading clubs were experienced. Viewing them as participants in the study served to value their contributions and equalized the research process (Pillow, 2003) which involved reciprocal hearing, listening and speaking. I have tried to avoid what Sayer (2011: 15) terms "bloodless descriptions of people" as rational actors or subjects, but instead have named them, albeit anonymously. In so doing I hope they will live on the page as they did in the class as active co-constructors of knowledge and as

young people getting what they can from the education offered to them while demanding little. They are eager to learn and they believe that education will open doors and that there is a lesson to be learnt from books. This is an important starting point for an educational endeavour - and for high schools to recognise and build on with their grade 8 learners.

While I valued the learners' participation I must also acknowledge the role of the class teacher and other staff members at 'Bay High School'. Having worked with a number of grade 8 English teachers, I was very sensitive to the classroom as the teacher's space as well as to her authority in her subject area. In developing an alternative 'practice' which would allow learners more opportunities to read and engage with books, I worked closely with 'Ms Loti', the grade 8 English teacher. Together we found titles in the library and she organised the class into groups and distributed sets of readers to each to launch what became our reading clubs.

## **1.6 Research orientation**

The humanizing work of Hoppers and Richards (2011) seemed relevant when considering a rationale for research, i.e. that it needs to make a difference in human lives as, "the dignity of human beings lies in her or his capacity to join with others in building better relationships and a better world" (Ibid. 2011: 29). Critical realism, associated with Roy Bhaskar (1978, 1989, 2008), as one of the key theorists, has an 'emancipatory social practice' orientation predicated on the need for society to change. This change can only come about if we have an in-depth understanding of society and of social structures at play. Critical realism is based on a depth ontology, which, for my study, meant that learners participating in reading clubs' events were understood to be drawing on structures and mechanisms from a layer of reality, inaccessible to the senses, termed 'the Real'. Carter and New (2004: 16) explain the three layers of the depth ontology in the following way:

The 'actual' comprises events, happenings, phenomena, whether or not these are observed. The 'empirical' is a subset of the actual. The 'real' includes both the actual and empirical, as well as structures and mechanisms which may or may not be observed or indeed observable, but which are known by their effects.

I will explore this ontological position in more depth in Chapter 2 of this thesis, but, at this point, it is sufficient to say that what this layered ontology offered was an awareness that any research claims would be theoretical and could not claim to be complete understandings of the underlying layer of the Real. But by studying the effects of the Real, I could try to understand the underlying tendencies which might have been activated in the initiation of the reading clubs.

Margaret Archer's (1995, 2000, 2007c) social realism is based on Bhaskar's depth ontology. In trying to access the underlying causes of what we experience at the Actual and the Empirical, she separates structure, culture and agency so as to be better able to explain their interplay. This separation is called analytical dualism and allows the researcher to explore the interaction of the 'people' with the 'parts' (i.e. structure and culture). The use of Archer's 'morphogenetic framework' then allows us to explore this interaction over time in order to explain change or non-change (stasis). The starting point of a study involving the use of the morphogenetic framework is referred to as 'T<sub>1</sub>' or Time 1. Archer marks progress over time, as 'T<sub>2</sub> to T<sub>3</sub>', which corresponds to the reading club process in my study. The end of the investigation is labelled 'T<sub>4</sub>' and it is there that I draw conclusions regarding how reading clubs, may or may not, have contributed to shifts in learners' reading identities. So, theories of social and critical realism provide explanatory power to understand and explain interactions in reading clubs at different levels. The basis for emancipatory social practice is an understanding of the structures at work or "the reality of the mechanisms themselves" (Corson, 1991: 232) in applied social science, and in this case, education.

In the research continuum, the position of the researcher has moved contingent with existing research paradigms and critiques. Within qualitative ethnographic research, authoritative objective standpoints have been questioned and more reflexive collaborative approaches advocated to avoid 'essentialising' the 'other' as the object of research. As I will explain in Chapter 2, since critical realists acknowledge the fallibility of researchers attempting to excavate the level of the Real, such authoritative standpoints are also unacceptable in research underpinned by this philosophy. Regardless of such theoretical considerations, it would have been difficult, in any case, to take up an outsider position as I had invested so heavily in

this research and maintained links with participants: therefore a more participatory understanding of research was needed. As an older ‘teacher figure’ in relation to the young learners, there was a clear power differential. Nonetheless, in the main this study was “mutually constructed in the interaction that takes place between the observer and observed” (Erickson, 2011: 50). Erickson also shows how re-evaluations of research can illustrate how powerfully the researcher’s perspective, politics and ideology can influence what is seen. This raises the concern that researchers only see what they expect to see, “ignoring disconfirming evidence” (Erickson, 2011: 51). In setting up reading clubs with learners I expected to see learners taking up reading practices, so this comment is valid up to a point. What I will be discussing in this thesis is what else emerged and how it emerged - and how different literacy experiences were mobilized in response to the books. So I am aware of my responsibility to my participants in sharing our reading journey with insights into their experience of reading clubs. This is not Behar’s ‘break your heart’ research (as cited in Foley, 2002): instead it is a presentation of reading clubs filtered through my limited, and sometimes incomplete, understanding.

### **1.6.1 A note on writing**

Pelias’s evocative piece on *Writing into Position* draws attention to many of the challenges of doing just that. He points to writing as claiming a space and taking up a position to be heard as “research lives in possibility and promise” (Pelias, 2011: 659). In addition he suggests that understanding comes in the process of writing so that the writing itself is a method of inquiry. As such it allows a working through of attenuating scales of clarification and nuance which strives to shake into order an experiential mass. Through this ‘shake-down’ of writing a clearer, less disheveled quilt may appear, maybe still patchy but with some squares that resonate with the heart, others that could be stitched together more clearly and sections that complement each other seamlessly. In some ways we write what we read: Pelias (2011), unlike other theorists, encourages a more poetic voice. The act of writing allows the writer to organize thinking, and in this process of ‘writing into’, the writer crystalizes her thinking and ‘languages’ herself into position. So, for Pelias, the writing involves both a realization of clearer thinking and a record in the form of a completed text. This resonates both with the writing of this study and also with the

learners who wrote themselves into positions in journal writing, which became for them too, a 'realization and a record' of their own thinking.

### **1.7 Significance of the study**

Within the context of the so-called literacy crises in South Africa, this study attempts to present a different perspective. Through working with learners in a reading club I explore the resources learners draw on to make sense of their reading. In this process learners have multiple opportunities to read and write around books, which is in itself a specific literacy. This then is a view beyond the national tests and media reports. It is an attempt to do things differently, as "[T]o do the same thing over and over again and [to] expect a different result is the definition of insanity" (Steinbach, as cited in Janks, 2011). What this research offers then is the learners' experiences and understandings of the literacy practices associated with the reading clubs introduced into their class. Their voices then allow me and, I hope, my readers to gain a better understanding of the way the reading clubs contributed to those lived experiences.

### **1.8 Overview of the research**

In Chapter 2, I explore the theoretical framework of this study by explaining critical realism as a 'depth ontology' and exploring how this informs our understandings of what knowledge is, as well as how causation and emergence contribute to our understanding of social events. As I used Archer's (1995) 'morphogenetic morphostatic' model to frame this study over time, I explain how structure, culture and agency provide a way of understanding learners' interactions in reading clubs.

In Chapter 3 I focus on literacy with particular attention to New Literacies, socio-cultural understandings of literacies as 'situated' and Street's (1984) ideological model. As this study occurs within a school context I explore how understandings of reading practices follow a trajectory over the learners' years at school and I locate reading clubs as a particular practice of reading within the school setting.

In Chapter 4, I explain the methodology and methods used in this study. I try to show how critical realism and social realism provide explanatory power in this case study. I

also outline how talk and journal writing functioned within the reading club process to provide the data for this study.

Chapter 5 is located at  $T_1$  or the beginning of the study. As such it aims to explore the way learners were socially and culturally conditioned to engage with text as a result of the positions they occupy in South African society.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I present my analysis of the data generated as a result of the study in the form of a series of vignettes. Drawing on Archer's morphogenetic framework, these vignettes are understood to illustrate  $T_2$  to  $T_3$ .

Chapter 8 concludes the study at  $T_4$  and here I consider to what extent morphogenesis occurred and I suggest future considerations for reading clubs in school settings.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

*"[A]lthough structure and agency are at work continuously in society, the analytical element consists in breaking up these flows into intervals determined by the problem in hand,"*

(Archer, 1995: 168).

#### 2.1 Introduction

As indicated in the previous chapter, the aim of this study was to examine how a reading club could contribute to shifts in the reading identities of learners at Bay High School, hereafter referred to as BHS. Because I was interested in moving from a description of what was observed to trying to understand underlying reasons, I needed a meta-theory that would allow for depth. In addition, as my engagement with learners in reading clubs took place over a six-month period and decisions about the clubs needed to be made on the basis of learners' responses to them, I needed theories that would accommodate this form of open research. Sayer (2000: 19) observes that "social systems are always open and usually complex and messy" as was the case here.

As a theoretical framework I have used the critical realist philosophy of Bhaskar (1978, 2008) and also Archer's (1995, 2000, 2007c) social realism which together offer the use of a 'depth' ontology to probe beneath the reality which is made apparent to us through the senses. Critical realism recognises the contribution of hidden causal mechanisms underlying this apparent reality. As Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen and Karlsson (2002: 5) note "to switch from events to mechanisms means switching the attention to what produces the events" - and it is what produces events related to shifts in learners' reading identities that is of interest in this study. Because the social world is pre-structured and we are born into society, by participating in that society we contribute to its reproduction as "society is both the condition and outcome of human agency and human agency both reproduces and transforms society" (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson & Norrie, 1998: xvi). Understanding what produces events can allow us to intervene in this process of reproduction. In the

case of this study, I wanted to intervene in the repeated construction of learners as 'poor readers'.

This chapter will therefore discuss critical realist concepts, more specifically how a stratified ontology can add to our understanding of phenomena and how knowledge is understood within critical realism. Thereafter I discuss how Archer's concepts of analytical dualism, her morphogenetic framework and her understanding of reflexivity could be used to better explore the changes that occurred among participants in the reading clubs within the context of BHS.

## **2.2 Critical Realism**

Critical realism is a theory which differentiates between 'reality' or 'truth' (or 'alethic truth' in Bhaskar's terms), about the world we live in and our *experiences of living* in the world. Knowledge about the world is not the same as our experience of it so these cannot be equated as some theories attempt to do. Our experiences are always limited and relative and can never give us a full picture of what we seek to explore. Thus critical realism draws a clear distinction between ontology – or knowledge – and epistemology – or how we can come to know.

The term 'critical realism' came from Bhaskar's interest in a philosophy of science termed 'transcendental realism' combined with 'critical naturalism', which is a philosophy of social science. These two positions were combined to form a new philosophy, termed critical realism, which he explains in *A Realist Theory of Science* (1978). This was his attempt to offer an alternative to positivism and to undemanding moves within the history of scientific research (Bhaskar, 2008). Bhaskar was concerned with emancipatory social justice, which could not be achieved without a clearer understanding of the workings of both the natural and social world. This understanding of the world has, at its heart, the concept of emergence from a deeper strata of reality, for, as Bhaskar (1986: 103) contends, "[I]t is only if social phenomena are genuinely emergent that realist explanations in the human sciences are justified". The explanation of social phenomena in realist terms, for Bhaskar, implies emancipatory possibilities. For emancipatory practice we need to identify the structures at work to be able to change the social world (Corson, 1991).

When critical realist ontology is extended to the social sciences, non-human properties like reasons and explanations offered to direct human behaviour are regarded as real entities, according to Corson, who goes on to assert

[I]f reasons or accounts of one kind or another constitute the hypothetical generative mechanisms in our social science theories or models, then the twin tasks of research, in the sociology of education for example, are firstly to identify the existence and secondly to detail the operation of these mechanisms: to show the hypothetical reasons or accounts to be real (Corson, 1991: 233).

Sayer (2000) suggests that theory should be used in the service of understanding the world, which exists independently of our theorising about it. Following Bhaskar, Sayer distinguishes between the real, which exists whether we can perceive it or not, described as “the realm of objects, their structures and powers” (2000: 6), and our experiences and observations of this realm. The role of theory is to assist in moving from the world we can know through the senses to that which is not directly observable or perceivable.

The value of critical realism is that it offers an alternative to empiricism and positivism on the one hand and relativism on the other:

There is more to the world than patterns of events. It has ontological depth: events rise from the workings of mechanisms which derive from the structures of objects, and they take place within geo-historical contexts (Sayer 2000: 15).

### **2.2.1 Positivism & empiricism**

From a critical realist perspective, positivism mistakenly conflates the empirical with its underlying laws, resulting in epistemic fallacy (Bhaskar, 2008). The real, which exists outside of our knowing it, cannot be equated with the processes or procedures used to know it. Empirical knowledge, which derives from our everyday sensory experience of the world, cannot fully account for reality, and attempts to do so throughout history exemplify our limited understanding of the world. For example, the perception and belief that the earth was the centre of the universe held sway for centuries as supported by everyday perceptions: new insight into celestial movements via Copernicus’ theories and Galileo’s telescope challenged this strongly-held empirical view which was so dominant that the latter was ‘encouraged’

to recant his views. Because what we *know* changes, critical realism’s focus is not on knowing; instead it is a theory of being or ontology (Corson, 1991). Bhaskar says that we can only make sense of our experiences at the empirical level if we acknowledge other layers that feed into it. Empiricism reduces the world to our experiences of it, which denies the existence of the underlying causal mechanisms and generative powers at the level of the real. Neither empiricism, nor its twin, positivism, account for the *causes* of experiences, thus both ignore the need to understand causal mechanisms. Bhaskar addresses this problem by distinguishing between different levels of reality. This distinction between the Real, the Actual and the Empirical is the basis of his stratified ontology.

### 2.2.2 A stratified ontology

As mentioned earlier, recognition of a stratified ontology is central to critical realism. What Bhaskar means by this is that there are three levels, or, domains, of reality i.e. the Real, the Actual and the Empirical as illustrated in Table 2.1.

	<i>Domain of Real</i>	<i>Domain of Actual</i>	<i>Domain of Empirical</i>
<i>Mechanisms</i>	√		
<i>Events</i>	√	√	
<i>Experiences</i>	√	√	√

Table 2.1 Bhaskar’s levels of the Real, the Actual and the Empirical (Bhaskar, 2008: 2)

What this shows is that at the level of the Empirical, we only have access to experiences (though we may be able to discern aspects of the Actual and the Real) and that these experiences are derived from other activities at the level of the Actual and the Real. It is activity in the form of mechanisms and structures in the domain of the Real that underlie what we see and experience in the Empirical domain. What Bhaskar argues here is that “real structures exist independently of and are often out of phase with the actual pattern of events” (2008: 3) and that we cannot fully account for our experiences because we do not always know the generative mechanisms operating at the level of the Real. This is the purpose of research: to understand and explain the generative mechanisms, together with their tendencies which might give

rise to the phenomena we observe and experience at the level of the Empirical. The level of the Real can include physical objects, such as minerals or social objects like bureaucracies but all have capacities and powers which may, or may not, be exercised (Sayer, 2000). The level of the Actual, often referred to as the level of events, relates to what happens when powers are activated such as when a previously idle person does work (Sayer, 2000) or when, in the case of this study, readers start to read in different ways. It presupposes that the capacity was always there but had not been galvanised for whatever reasons. As Bhaskar's table indicates, the domain of the Empirical includes experiences and at this level we try to make claims from what is observable to what we can infer about causal structures. The claims that might follow do not change the Real, as in the example of a 'flat' earth. Whether the current belief is that the earth is flat or round does not alter the earth – it does not change according to what people believe (Sayer, 2000).

Any theory of science can be considered an *epistemology* as it is our understanding of the real world and is not the real. This is what Bhaskar considers an epistemic fallacy – equating our theories of the real with altheic truth. Our beliefs about knowledge are socially produced so that all knowledge is in fact transient (Corson, 1991). For example, in a scientific experiment the scientist may be a causal agent who initiates a chain of events. The scientist, however, is not the cause of the law which she identifies from the sequence of events. (Bhaskar, 2008). So we need to acknowledge our contributory role as causal agents in the theorization of science or social science.

The levels of the Real, the Actual and the Empirical have been tabulated, with elements of the reading clubs, in Table 2.2 to show how the Real can include objects, together with their powers and properties, as well as events and experiences. As the 'base stratum' it must contain all of the aspects of the other layers (Shipway, 2011). The Actual consists of the events that do, or do not occur, depending on the activation of the powers at the level of the Real, together with empirical experiences. The Empirical consists only of that which can be empirically observed and measured, which may be, metaphorically speaking, the tip of the iceberg.

The challenge of the Real is that it exists outside our ability to know it directly, i.e. is not transparent, but its powers and mechanisms can be experienced indirectly (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). Scientists and philosophers through the centuries have tried to account for individual experiences at the Empirical level, thus recognising the existence of forces beyond their perception. So, this third level of the Empirical or observable, is recognised as a valuable level of experience but realists acknowledge the underlying causal criteria too (Collier, 1994; Sayer, 2010), and warn that sometimes the observable only yields products of unobservable entities.

	<b>Domain of Real</b>	<b>Domain of Actual</b>	<b>Domain of Empirical</b>
<b>Mechanisms</b>	<p>Objects (with inherent properties), their structures and powers, or “capacities to behave in particular ways” (Sayer, 2000:11)</p> <p><i>Learners as agents with inherent capacities to read</i></p> <p><i>Structures such as social class, race, gender, the education system with the potential to condition reading in certain ways</i></p>		
<b>Events</b>	<p>Events that do or do not occur, activation or exercise of powers</p>	<p>Events that do or do not occur, activation or exercise of powers</p> <p><i>Literacy events related to reading clubs</i></p> <p><i>Cake sales</i></p> <p><i>Library clean-ups</i></p>	
<b>Experiences</b>	<p>Events that are experienced &amp; observed, based on causal mechanisms at the level of the real</p>	<p>Events that are experienced &amp; observed, based on causal mechanisms at the level of the real</p>	<p>Events that are experienced &amp; observed based on causal mechanisms at the level of the real</p> <p><i>Learners’ experiences and observations related to their participation in reading clubs.</i></p>

Table 2.2 The Real, the Actual and the Empirical in Critical Realism

### 2.2.3 Transitive and intransitive domains

For Bhaskar (1978), objects of knowledge at the level of the Real exist irrespective of human knowledge of them and are therefore referred to as 'intransitive' (see Fig 2.1). He distinguishes between two types of 'objects' of knowledge, a transitive and an intransitive dimension. In the transitive dimension there is "antecedently established knowledge" or existing knowledge, which is the starting point for the examination of new knowledge. The intransitive domain consists of the structures and mechanisms that exist independently of human thought and action (Bhaskar, 2008). Structures and mechanisms in the intransitive domain are enduring and ahistorical, whereas theories that try to account for this domain have changed throughout history. So our knowledge of the intransitive domain "will always be framed and articulated in the transitive domain" (Shipway, 2011: 60). Theories of science in the transitive domain are therefore critiqued and replaced with new theories but these do not change what happens at the level of the Real. This can be understood from the critical realist position of 'epistemological relativism and ontological realism' (Bhaskar, 2008; Shipway, 2011).

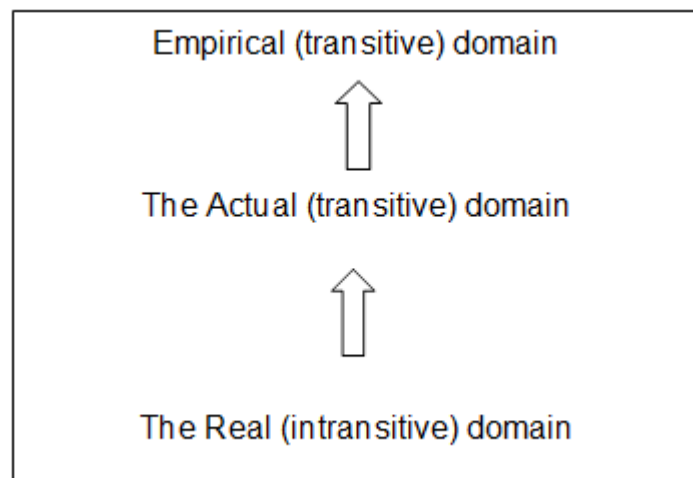


Figure 2.1 Interactions between intransitive and transitive domains of knowledge, adapted from Bhaskar, 1978

While the Empirical and Actual Emerge from the real (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 2000; Mingers, 2000) (indicated in the diagram above by the upward arrows), the cycles of explanation and theory in the transitive domain continually try to account for the Empirical and to perceive the Real. Hartwig suggests that analysis is divided

between “[E]xperiences, events and causal mechanisms (the overlapping domains of the empirical, the actual and the real)” (2008:xv) and transitive and intransitive dimensions. He argues that “the transitive dimension is the creative, praxis-driven process of production of scientific knowledge or epistemological process” (2008: xvi).

To apply Bhaskar’s model of a stratified reality to my study: my concern relates to observations concerning learners’ lack of reading (i.e. a failure to observe literacy events) at the levels of the Actual and the Empirical. These observations are also manifested in tests such as PIRLS. This concern has then resulted in attempts to trigger unexercised powers at the Real through the introduction of reading clubs. Journal writing and reading club talk, conceptualised as events at the Actual, became ways of capturing learners’ experiences of reading (conceptualised at the level of the Empirical) and, thus, ways of accessing the Real. So central to this research was an investigation into causal mechanisms that came into play as a result of the introduction of reading clubs and the literacies they promoted. If this is mapped on to Bhaskar’s transitive and intransitive domains, together with relative positionings within a stratified ontology, a two-way effect as represented in Figure 2.2 results (see below). The Empirical level consists both of the general reading scores as evidenced by national assessment on a large scale and by how reading clubs were experienced within the school system by both learners and the teachers involved. At the Actual level are the events of the reading clubs specifically and within the larger school context in the form of book displays and library events. At the Real are the “generative mechanisms whose powers may exist unexercised or be exercised unrealised” (Archer, 1998: 190), in the form of unexercised reading abilities, selection of reading material, or reflexivity.

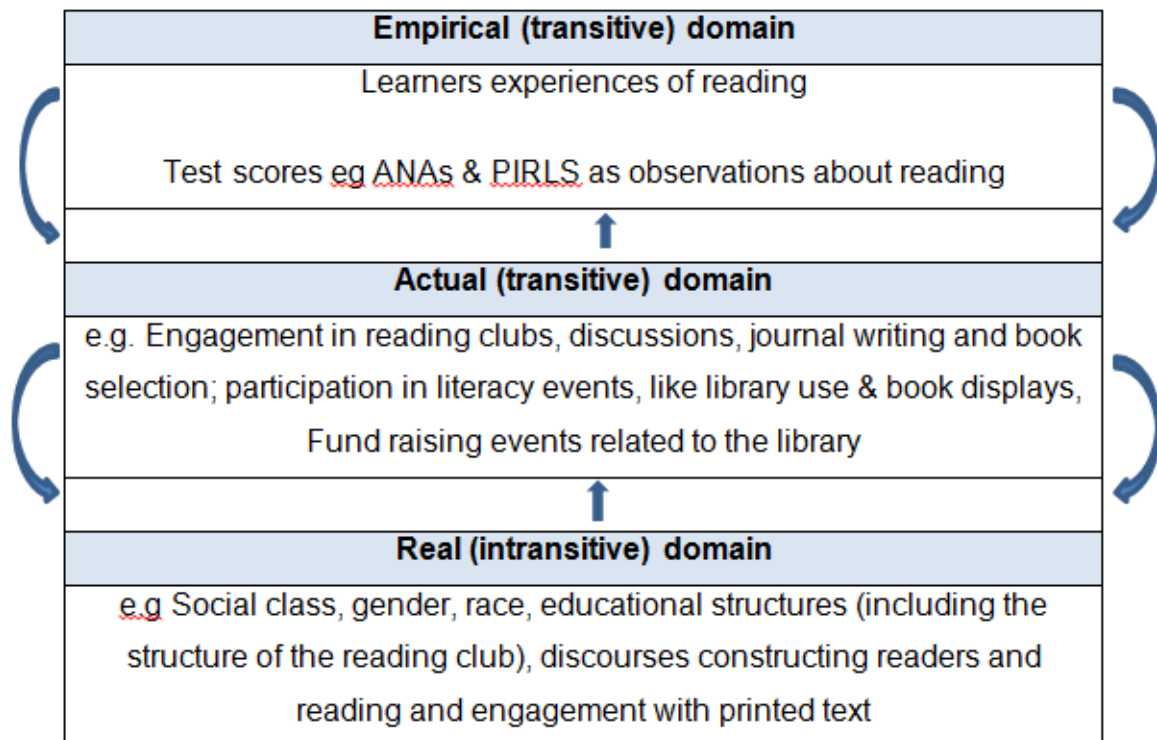


Figure 2.2 The Real, the Actual and the Empirical and reading clubs

Bhaskar reminds us that the objects of knowledge in the social arena are not separate from the process of production of knowledge about them as is the case in the natural world. Studying minerals has no impact on the minerals but studying learners' behaviour does (as even the fact of being observed can impact on behaviour). So production of knowledge in the social sciences "may be causally, and internally, related to the process of production of the objects concerned" (Bhaskar, 1998: 227). What is important for Bhaskar is that once an object of study exists, no matter how it was produced, it still constitutes an object of research. So the categorical properties of objects in human studies differ from those in the sciences as "they are an aspect of, and causal agent in, what they seek to explain" (Ibid). The reading clubs which are the focus of the research, became weekly events in which learners may or may not, have drawn on prior experiences of reading or reading ability. They might have engaged in discussions which motivated them to read and discuss more, or not. Through writing in journals about their reading they may or may not have developed a reflexive stance. The objects at the Real exist as the focus of the study but are flexible and mutable in the course of the study because of interdependency of the various causal factors.

#### **2.2.4 Emergence**

Because critical realism has shown ontology “to be bivalent, and indeed polyvalent” (Price, 2005: 88) the importance of an explanation to account adequately for evidence increases. A stratified ontology avoids conflating *how we know* with *what we know* and recognises that what emerges can be quite different from its constituents. Sayer illustrates this with the example of water, which has very different properties from those of the elements of hydrogen and oxygen which comprise it (Sayer, 2000: 12). From the combination of these elements, which exist at a foundational stratum of reality, a new compound, water, with its own unique properties, results. This is a useful illustration of the concept of *emergence* where two or more elements or aspects in conjunction give rise to new phenomena with new properties or powers. For example, a new phenomenon, like water, is not reducible to the constituents which contributed to its formation, though the new emergent entity is dependent on these constituents.

In relation to this study, the concept of emergence offers the potential of accounting for literacy events and participants’ experiences of reading as a result of the activation of latent, unexercised powers and properties located at the level of the Real. It is this process of activation and the resulting emergence, that this study seeks to explore.

#### **2.2.5 Causation**

Because we entertain a stratified understanding of the world, we accept that there are structures at the level of the Real that have certain generative powers and properties. As noted earlier, the configuration of different mechanisms or elements can result in the emergence of a new phenomenon. Causal powers are inherent in the various structures and mechanisms at the level of the Real, whether these powers are activated or not. In the open systems of social science studies, the activation of causal powers is contingent and explanations involve identifying causal mechanisms and their powers - and when and how they may have been activated (Sayer, 2000). Social science research seeks explanatory power not predictive power (Collier, 1994; Bhaskar, 1998; Sayer, 2000) so what causes something to happen cannot be linked to regularity (in how often something happens), nor to a single ‘first’ cause. Causes can be linked to the physical attributes of human beings –

that they have certain powers that they might exercise or not – and to social structures and mechanisms which may invoke certain attributes contingently. Understanding this concept of causation means that in the reading clubs, regularity cannot be seen as causal, which makes identifying possible causal mechanisms in learners taking up reading and developing reader identities, even more tenuous.

### **2.2.6 Understandings of knowledge within critical realism**

Many of the commonplace understandings of the world are based on empirical evidence. In fact society seems to set great store on the validity of factual information often presented in the media in the form of statistics. I felt a positivist approach would not be adequate to describe the changes experienced through involvement in the reading clubs. However I needed to understand the different orientations of critical realism when used to understand natural sciences as opposed to social sciences. Mingers' (2000) exploration of the application of critical realism in research teases out the different foci, as do Sayer (2000) and Danermark *et al.* (2002). A tabulated comparison between a critical realist approach using the examples of science experiments on the one hand, and an educational study on the other, is presented in Table 2.3. Mingers' study helped to elucidate how critical realist ontology could be applied to these different epistemological approaches. While setting up a comparative table might seem to establish binaries, this is not the purpose here. The table is a useful heuristic and starting point for a qualitative, small-scale research study in a largely positivist world.

This table is also useful in establishing a framework of how to talk about research in the social sciences. Research with people necessitates an awareness of their variability both within groups in the same context and within the individual, hence the need to recognise this as an open, sometimes messy system that cannot be controlled as in a science experiment. Danermark *et al.* (2002) suggest that open systems are challenging as “generative mechanisms operate in combination with each other; the more mechanisms involved, the more difficult to anticipate the outcome” (Ibid: 206). From a Bakhtinian perspective this is articulated as a focus on ‘objects of knowledge’ in natural science, which is therefore monologic, whereas “the human sciences are necessarily dialogic because they are concerned with other subjects” (Dentith, 1995: 20).

	<b>Natural science</b>	<b>Social science</b>
<i>Objects</i>	Naturally produced, socially defined, passive in research	Socially produced & socially defined, active & interested participants
<i>Study</i>	Simple hermeneutics	Double hermeneutics
<i>Theory</i>	Predictive	Explanatory
<i>System</i>	Open but can be closed via experiments and controlled laboratory conditions	Open and difficult to close or control (though large scale quantitative studies could be said to be closed)
<i>Results</i>	Can be measured	Meaningful, so can be described and understood but the goal is not to measure

Table 2.3 A critical realist perspective on research in the natural and social sciences (Mingers, 2000: 1263; Sayer, 2000; Danermark et al., 2002)

In both natural and social science research, critical realism suggests that knowledge is fallible and therefore open to refutation, especially if these knowledge claims derive from the most accessible level of the Empirical. These warnings about the tentative nature of knowledge claims encourage a search for a deeper understanding of what lies outside the Empirical or observable. From a critical realist viewpoint, reality consists of more than the observable events but is “about objects, entities and structures that exist (even though perhaps unobservable) and generate the events we observe” (Mingers, 2000: 1260). A realist ontology accepts that entities exist independently of our knowledge of them. While this may seem self-evident in that human beings cannot claim to know or understand all the events that occur, it also recognises that even when we claim some knowledge or understanding of events or practices, from a critical realist perspective, it will be limited and incomplete. What knowledge we have may seem true for now but could change.

### 2.2.7 Critical realism and society

In examining society, critical realism avoids reducing knowledge of society to the knowledge of individual people, or social atomism (Bhaskar, 1998) and instead recognises that society, or social groups, have powers that are different from the powers of their constituent parts. Individuals’ positions are *relational* and reflective of a role in society. In a relational model of society, or in an aspect of society like

education, a 'teacher' suggests some learners; a 'principal' suggests a staff of teachers so "[O]ur social being is constituted by relations and our social acts presuppose them" (Collier, 1994: 140). Bhaskar's critical realism, as an 'underlabouring' philosophy, lays the foundation for Archer's separation of structure and agency with the Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA). Bhaskar suggests that "[S]ociety is both the ever-present condition (material cause) and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency" (1998: 215). This recognises that people are born into certain social situations, as in a language group or period in history, and by speaking the language perpetuate its use, or change it.

In a simplistic 'natural science' versus 'social science' binary, quantitative research is often associated with natural sciences and qualitative with social sciences. While this is clearly an artificial divide, and a gross generalisation, there have been some tendencies to support this perception of research. What I find more useful is the concept of an intensive study which "is concerned with what makes things happen in specific cases" (Sayer, 2000: 20) and often uses ethnographic methods. An intensive study takes more cognizance of context, which is importance in understanding what Bakhtin (1981) terms, the 'living utterance'. Using a critical realist perspective "[I]ntensive research seeks out substantial relations of connection and situates practices within wider contexts, thereby illuminating part-whole relationships", (Sayer, *Ibid*: 2). This, then leads to understandings of knowing and how this *knowing* will be achieved.

### **2.2.7.1 Inference and Knowing**

Critical realism recognises the importance of reflection or second-order monitoring where people make a "retrospective commentary" (Corson, 1991:227) on earlier actions. Corson claims that this retrospection "gives special status to people's accounts of their own behaviour" and that this surpasses accounts established through the third person, or researcher's observations (Corson, 1991: 227). Thus retrospection by participants can be used as a mechanism to understand experiences at the level of the Real. So journal writing could be examined as a form of retrospection, thereby according learners' own experiences this special status. Through examining learners' journals, we can come to see their experiences, as well as thoughts on their experiences, of reading clubs.

Critical realism offers inference tools, such as abstraction<sup>2</sup>, abduction and retroduction<sup>3</sup> to make knowledge claims. What abstraction offers is a way to separate different mechanisms which together produce certain events or phenomena. An aim of abstraction is to isolate certain aspects of thought and thereby clarify concepts, or abstractions, more precisely (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). Retroduction, like induction, is a type of inference from observed to unobserved things. Price suggests that “induction is the inference from past to future while retroduction is the inference from actual phenomena to structural causes.” (2005: 93). Danermark *et al.* suggest that retroductive inference, or transfactual arguments, involve reasoning from the concrete to a reconstruction of conditions so we can know the constituents and mechanisms needed for a phenomenon to occur. Abduction involves the use of theory to recontextualise or ‘re-see’ a phenomenon.

Clearly, thinking and reasoning are critical to any research but Danermark *et al.* claim

that the concept of inference or thought operation refers to different ways of arguing and drawing conclusions – moving from something and arriving at something else – having in common that we thereby link observations of different phenomena to general concepts. Inference is a way of reasoning towards an answer to questions such as: What does this mean? What follows from this? What must exist for this to be possible (2002: 79)

Danermark *et al.* suggest four complementary modes of inference for critical realist research, namely: deduction, induction, abduction and retroduction. Although all are valuable, all also have limitations. For example, deduction is a logical analytical mode of reasoning that does not tell us anything new about reality, while inductions “are restricted to conclusions at the empirical level” (Ibid: 81). All have their own strengths and applicability too. Danermark *et al.* show how abduction has resulted in new configurations of knowledge. That is *connections* or *relations* are made which help to explain known phenomena in novel ways. An example cited by Danermark *et al.*, is Giddens’ recontextualization of anorexia as denoting reflexive identity and the

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<sup>2</sup> Danermark *et al.* (2002) refer to abstraction as a process for conceptualization rather than inferring new meaning: however I have chosen to group it together with abduction and retroduction as all can be understood as ‘thought operations’ in pursuit of the underlying real layer.

<sup>3</sup> Price uses these terms interchangeably but Danermark *et al.* suggest a nuanced progression from abduction to retroduction.

tightly controlled body (Ibid: 91). Because abduction draws on creativity and imagination in the use of theory, it broadens our knowledge by introducing new ideas and thereby stimulates further research.<sup>4</sup> Retroduction moves in the opposite direction from abduction. It presumes events and mechanisms, with potential causal powers, outside what can be empirically observed and attempts to theorise about these prerequisite causal conditions or structures (Danermark *et al.*).

A depth ontology, which reduces any tendencies towards epistemic fallacy, gives knowledge claims more validity. Epistemic fallacy (Bhaskar, 1978; Collier, 1994; Shipway, 2011) equates our knowledge of the world with the reality beyond our experience. This means that ontology, or beliefs about knowing are reduced to our epistemology or belief about where knowledge comes from or the basis for knowing, or, as Mingers puts it “reducing the ontological domain of existence to the epistemological domain of knowledge” (2000: 1261). Bhaskar sought to avoid this conflation, which he described as “the view that statements of being can be reduced to statements of knowledge” (Bhaskar, 1978: 36).

Shipway’s ambitious attempt to reconcile two parallel strands of critical realism, and in the same exercise show how Bhaskar’s oeuvre of successive waves of refinement can be applied to the shaggy beast of education in general, does offer some gems. He points to the pervasive epistemic fallacies that learning or achievement can be reduced to results. Standardised tests, such as the PIRLS and ANAs in South Africa, give an indication of learning but only at an Empirical level. Shipway shows how critical realism would account for testing as “the modulated reproduction of social structures” (Bhaskar, 1986: 195, as cited in Shipway, 2011: 135), which leads “to the misrepresentation of the object” (Shipway, Ibid: 135). This has particular relevance for my study where learners’ learning manifested through various events, could not be adequately revealed in empirical testing, hence the need for a methodological approach which would attempt to surface the Real.

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<sup>4</sup> Danermark *et al.* also refer to Marx’s recontextualizing of economic forms as abduction but Marx himself as quoted in Collier (1994) describes it as abstraction. Clearly both uses recognise how the process of redescription resulted in fresh insight into economic forces.

### 2.2.8 Critical realism and language

As language and literacy are central to this research it behoves me to outline how critical realist theorists have understood the role of language in understanding reality. Sayer (1992), and Danermark *et al.* (2002) acknowledge the existence of language outside of research, or more generally, outside of our use of it. In a sense we can only speak the reality that we have the language for and yet as Sayer reminds us “the effects of language are not fixed like those of bricks and steel. New interpretations are always possible” (1992: 20). Despite this, when we enter a linguistic community we enter an “already interpreted world” (Danermark, *Ibid.*: 29). In fact, in attempting to convey meaning we reproduce a reality that has been conceptualised on the basis of other people’s experiences and realities. While Danermark *et al.* alert us to this linguistic prison, in doing so they also alert us to the relationship between language and reality and that all concepts have a genealogy and are theory laden. Therefore conceptualisation, via language, is part “both of the research process and the research object” (*Ibid.*: 36). Bhaskar (1998) too acknowledges how theory is built on antecedent concepts and the necessity of clarifying terminology as well as theoretical precursors. Theories in the social sciences have an explanatory and not a predicative role with language as a critical component. Meanings and hypotheses must be expressed linguistically and confirmed in dialogue as “[L]anguage here stands to the conceptual aspect of social science as geometry stands to physics” (Bhaskar, 1998: 226). Sayer (2000: 54) claims that “knowledge is discursive and discourse is intertextual and borderless”. This suggests a Bakhtinian leaning to an understanding and explanation of learning as multi-voiced language.

The other important understanding of the role of language from a critical realist perspective is that language learning is activity dependent. Archer suggests that “language can only be learnt by reference to reality, and that it gains its meaning from its relation to this same independent reality” (Archer, 2007a: 4). Recognising the primacy of practice is important in considering how learners see themselves in relation to the practice of reading and the language of books, whether this is the sanctioned literary meta-language, or Rosenblatt’s (1978) untrammelled ‘emotional response’. Without the engagement in the practice the language is meaningless and is not learned.

### **2.2.9 Bhaskar to Archer**

Bhaskar offers a philosophy or metatheory which functions as an 'underlabourer' to our understanding of society. Archer builds on many of Bhaskar's notions and acknowledges him as an underlabourer of the concepts she develops. As alluded to earlier, Bhaskar recognised a distinction between human practice and social structure and anticipates Archer by suggesting that conscious production of society could be termed *duality of structure*, and the reproduction of conditions of production as the *duality of praxis* (Bhaskar, 1998: 215). Archer takes these ideas as the foundation for her concept of analytical dualism. Critical realism as a social ontology recognises a layered understanding which uses analytical dualism, based on the theory of separation of structure and agency, as the explanatory methodology (Archer, 1998).

### **2.3 Archer's theories**

Archer's thinking offers some useful ideas for analysing the data in my study. Firstly, her insistence on the artificial separation of the 'parts' (structure and culture) and the 'people' (agency) for analytical purposes only means it is possible to examine agential actions and causal mechanisms as part of the school structures without conflating the two components. Reading clubs fitted into the school structures of classrooms and timetables but learners could choose to participate within them, or not, and participated differently as they exercised agency. The concept of analytical dualism avoids conflating these constituents while recognising that each is formed by the other and contributes to the other while being separate. The concept of morphogenesis flows from the separation of structure and culture and suggests that, from the interplay of structural and cultural mechanisms, change may – in the form of morphogenesis – or may not – in the form of morphostasis – result. As this was an interventionist study, with new structures in the form of materials, and agential possibilities for the learners in the grade 8 classroom, any morphogenesis, structural or cultural, would be noteworthy. Within analytical dualism and the morphogenetic approach, Archer recognises the practice of reflexivity as a mechanism both for agential action in relation to structures and as an indication of morphogenesis. In this study reflexivity may or may not have been exercised by learners in their reading journals or in final interviews with me. The explanatory value of these three

concepts, i.e. analytical dualism, morphogenesis and reflexivity were useful to my study and will be examined further.

### **2.3.1 Analytical dualism**

Archer acknowledges the inherent complexities in understanding society when she asks:

What is it that depends upon intentional human action but which never conforms to the intentions? What is it that is reliant upon people's conceptualisations but which they never fully know? What is it that is always activity-dependent but that never exactly corresponds to the activity of even the most powerful? (1998: 190)

In naming structure and agency as a riddle she illustrates the seeming contrariness and intractability of these concepts while still attempting to distinguish between the 'parts' and the 'people' (1996). In order to comment on the interplay between these, it was first necessary to recognise their separateness theoretically and how they come together in reality. In this separation Archer avoids conflating structure and agency or allowing one to subsume the other. She avoids siding with either individualism or collectivism. She draws on Bhaskar's distinction between people and societies as "the properties possessed by social forms may be very different from those possessed by the individuals upon whose activity they depend" (Bhaskar cited in Archer 1998: 200). So structures, with positions including responsibilities, tasks and duties, can be separated from the activities or practices attached to those positions as there are interactions between individuals and social groups (Bhaskar, 1989; Archer, 1998). Analytical dualism recognises the necessity of separating structure and agency. Separation allows for the identification of emergent structures as well as the differentiation between the causal power of people and the causal powers of structures and their mutual influences.

#### **2.3.1.1 *The Role of Structure***

Analytical dualism and the transformation model of social action (TMSA) are both premised on a separation of structure and agency. Social structures have effects through human action yet many of these effects result from the actions of people who have long since died. So the social practice of my withdrawing money at an

ATM is dependent on a banking system, which has developed over the ages, as well as the practice of legal tender for work done. I do not create monetary systems or banking practices but participate in them as given structures of the social and economic world. As established structures, banking systems and modern currencies are “autonomous possessors of causal powers” which continue to have an effect on people’s lives and activities (Archer, 1998: 368). And, through working within these structures, current human activity serves to perpetuate, or change these structures. Agents may inherit a structure and work to change it, as in an educational system. The resultant change in structure may include changed roles for the agents who initiated the original structural change. As both structures and agents have changed in this process, it is known as a double morphogenesis (Archer, 1995). Structures are irreducible to individuals or groups, pre-exist both and can be changed by the interplay with agents. In the same way that some structures may pre-date agents, “the self-same agents are themselves prior to later structural elaboration” (Archer, 1995: 75). So structures might change or ‘morph’ over time due to agential interplay.

Education can be considered as a structure with various mechanisms, properties and causal powers which may or may not be exercised. It predates both the teachers and learners who are daily actors within the system and whose actions serve to perpetuate the structure and to modify it in the form of structural elaboration. This might happen at a school level where different forms of recognition or student involvement are provided for, or at a national level with revamped curricula. This has been the case in the South African system with Curriculum 2005, announced in 1998, which brought in Outcomes Based Education (OBE); the Revised National Curriculum and more recently the Curriculum and Policy Statement (CAPS) of 2010 – to be implemented from 2012 (DoE)

### **2.3.1.2 Agency**

The idea of agency is based on the recognition of agents which are “*collectivities* sharing the same *life-chances*” (italics in original, Archer, 2000; 261). As we are born into certain positions in society, and do not choose them, *agents* therefore are seen as belonging to a group which occupies a social position in relation to resource distribution. Archer sees agency as universal but allows individuality to social ‘actors’

who have found a role in which they can invest themselves (Archer, 2000). So agency can be enacted by a group or by an individual.

Conceptually, *agency* recognises the role of society and social groups in contributing to the structures that organise their lives. Social theories of agency need to reconcile the individual with the collective. Agency suggests the possibility for action and presumes the possibility of choices – and the ability to reflect on the choices, or not, that are available. The development of agency as it is demonstrated in our actions or 'intentionality' prior to our speech, follows from a 'primacy of practice' so that both agency and practice are central to the 'emergence of self' (Archer 2007a). Realist ontology recognises the emergence of new powers and properties that result from the combining of different elements and this can apply to agents as possessing emergent powers. Structures and agents belong to different strata of the social world and cannot be reduced or elided. Instead, recognising the duality of structures and agents is the first step to exploring the interplay between them (Archer, 1995). Agency emerges from a sense of personal identity and consciousness. Ultimately Archer rejects two approaches to sociality: 'Modernity's Man' as overly individual, and 'Society's Being' as overly social, as neither is cognisant of the three orders of reality. Instead personal emergent powers (PEPs) as well as the primacy of practice in which a continuous sense of self develops, recognise mankind's interactions in the natural, practical and social orders (Archer, 1995). Learners, as agents in reading clubs, engage in reading and discussing novels, as events at the Actual, in their grade 8 year. These reading club events, which were a regular class activity, were central to learners' building on that practice. Through on-going reflection the continuous sense of self and personal identity could follow. This will be further discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

From another perspective, agency is tied to notions of power, choice and enactment of free will in the face of power (Aitken, 2009). This draws on Foucaultian notions of taking action as "faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible inventions may open up" (Foucault, 2001: 330). Complementing agency is the notion of choice and the extent to which, in this case participants in reading clubs, had agency and how this was manifested in actions. So while Archer as a sociologist is concerned with agency as a collective, the concept of

individual agency and action is a central concern of this study. Linked with agency is the active agent: one who takes a stance and acts upon it. In this study it could include initial acts like a Head of Department contacting a local university for help with reading; a school principal welcoming a researcher into the school on a regular basis; a teacher opening her classroom to alternative pedagogic practices and allowing other agents into her class space or learners taking up alternative reading practices and positions. All of these constitute agential acts within the context of this study but it is particularly the taking up of literate positions by learners as collectives and as individual agents that will be the focus of this study.

### **2.3.1.3 Culture**

Culture refers to all existing knowledge, including language, beliefs by people and theories – all things capable of being known (Archer, 1996). Archer's cultural systems include all forms of knowledge, or intelligibilia, at any one time period. Cultural systems change over time as a result of new discoveries, growth in literature and theoretical developments (Archer 1998), like the addition of Einstein's relativity to the body of knowledge in the Twentieth Century. Archer distinguishes between thought-processes and the products of thought-processes as the former stand in causal relationships while the latter operate in logical relationships (Archer, 1998: 505). Cultural systems are man-made and in a continuous process of emergence as a result of "historical Socio-Cultural interaction" (Ibid: 507), and having emerged, have their own properties and act back on man. Archer's theory of cultural systems can accommodate logical contradictions: it examines the integration of socio-cultural relations within the cultural system while maintaining a distinction between them. This analytical distinction allows for a clearer understanding of these different strands while recognising that their interplay results in cultural elaboration through morphogenesis. A cultural system is constrained by what the language allows but this is compensated for in the emergent possibilities that arise from the new entities' and participants' interactions (Archer, 1998) – and so the cultural evolutionary cycle continues. The cultural system exerts a causal influence on the socio-cultural layer where the causal relationships between the groups and individuals can contribute to the elaboration of the cultural system of which they are a part. Thus, we have a stratified concept of cultural systems with an interplay between the system and the socio-cultural level at which actors act and interact causally and thereby generate

new theories at the cultural system level. The challenge in applying this to practice, is to disaggregate the cultural, as in the existing knowledge, from the socio-cultural, where human interactions occur, so the talk about reading at the socio-cultural interpersonal level of the reading clubs, can be disentangled from knowledge or theories about reading literacy and literature. From this analytical distinction the contribution of the socio-cultural to the elaboration of the cultural knowledge, or intelligibilia, can more easily be ascertained and noted.

#### **2.3.1.4 Analytical dualism and reading clubs**

Archer's 'structure, culture and agency' provides a way of examining the level of the Real in the reading clubs. School conditions are structural in that they provide a regulatory framework with particular roles and positions. The agency refers to the roles people play within this structure. Structures are activity-dependent so it is important to ask, as Archer does, on whose activities, or particular distributions, positions, roles and institutions themselves depend? Both structure and agency are mutually constitutive in that each contributes to the other, but can be examined separately. As Archer (1996) argues,

Because the social world is made up, *inter alia*, of 'structures' and of 'agents' and because these belong to different strata of social reality, there is no question of reducing one to the other or of eliding the two and there is every reason for exploring the interplay between them (Archer, *Ibid*: 691).

Archer's theory of the separation between structure and agency is known as 'analytical dualism'. Bennett, Harvey, Wise and Woods (2004: 448) show how these components "comprise analytically separable influences upon the social world we inhabit; yet, while analytically distinguishable can only be examined in combination", hence the need to examine the reading participants, on the one hand, and the structures of the club and classroom on the other, and also their mutual impact. It is important to be able to distinguish between 'human action and social structure' and thus to examine the interplay between them. As noted earlier, Archer's understanding is rooted in Bhaskar's critical realism and presumes a stratified ontology. She recognises Bhaskar's thinking in the need to distinguish between human action and social structure which depends on human actions for its reproduction and continuance. Therefore it is important to

distinguish sharply between the genesis of human actions, lying in the reasons, intentions and plans of human beings, on the one hand; and the structures governing the reproduction and transformation of social activities, on the other (Bhaskar, 1989: 79).

What analytical dualism means for my study is that the interplay between participants as agents, within the structures of the clubs, is crucial. ‘Social practice’ is the bridge between the two as “neither ‘structure’ nor ‘agency’ have independent or autonomous or anterior features” but only properties which appear in practice (Archer, 1996: 688). This is represented, in relation to my study, in Table 2.4 below.



Empirical	How reading clubs were experienced by teachers and learners; observations about reading on the basis of test scores e.g. ANAs & PIRLS		
Actual	Engagement in reading clubs, discussions, journal writing and book selection conceptualised as a series of events. Other events comprise library visits and fundraising activities		
Real	Structure Social class, gender, race, apartheid, material resources, educational structures	 Agency Reflexivity	 Culture Knowledge of literary works, theories of reading, discourses constructing readers and reading, literacy values.

Table 2.4 Interplay between structure, agency and culture in reading clubs

### 2.3.2 Morphogenesis

Morphogenesis is a theoretical approach which is premised on analytical dualism. As such it is a methodological tool to explain aspects of society. Recognising the separation of structure and agency is the starting point for analytical dualism and applying the separation avoids conflating these. Archer warns against *downward conflation* which occurs when structures engulf agency through regulation and socialization, whereas *upwards conflation* favours the agential powers to transform structures (Archer, 1995). Archer works to avoid both conflationist tendencies as downward conflation sees society as a regulated body with man as a mere pawn in the system, in comparison with upward conflation which claims the man’s actions determine the rules and regulations of a society which owes all its ordering to the on-going interactions of men. Archer also avoids a central conflation position in which structure and agency could be seen as mutually constitutive or two sides of the same

coin. Instead she argues for the autonomy of both structure and agency so their independent effects can be examined.

The morphogenetic approach is both a framework and a toolkit: as an explanatory programme it complements critical realism, and in analysing the interplay between structure and agency, it can be a "means of accounting for the trajectories and dynamics of social formations" (Archer, 2010: 274). So an understanding of morphogenesis emerges from a recognition of analytical dualism as "it is only through analysing the processes by which structure and agency shape and re-shape one another over time that we can account for the variable social outcomes at various times" (Archer, 1996: 693). Both Bhaskar and Archer try to connect structure and agency rather than "to sink the differences between them" and situate the connections temporally. The element of 'time' becomes critical to both Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Action – often referred to as TMSA – and Archer's morphogenesis. Both assert that "social structures are only efficacious in and through the activities of human beings" (Archer, 1995: 148). Even the actions of those long dead "continue to exert their effects upon subsequent actors and their actions as causal powers" (Archer, *Ibid*). An example of the effect of the actions of those long dead would be industrialization. The world today, in the twenty-teens, can clearly see the effects of, and lives with, industrialization initiated by actions of people like Richard Arkwright, James Watt and Henry Ford. Similarly, educational structures from previous centuries are still in place today. What this means for morphogenesis is that "structure necessarily predates the action(s) that transforms it" and that "structural elaboration necessarily post-dates those actions which have transformed it" (Archer, *Ibid*: 157), hence the criticality of time, indicated by T in Figure 2.3 below. Archer illustrates morphogenesis as interplay over time which may result in genesis, "signaling that the shaping is the product of social relations" (Archer, *Ibid*, 166) as in shape change, or *morphostasis* where the given form is maintained or preserved, as shown in Figure 2.3.

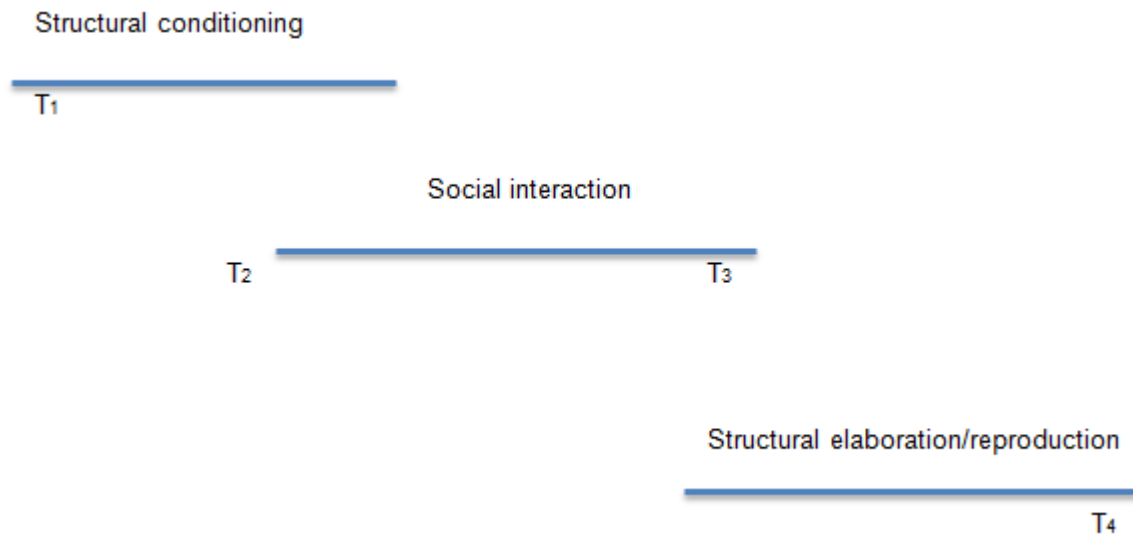


Figure 2.3 The morphogenesis of structure (from Archer, 1995: 193)

As structures both pre-date and post-date any cohort of incumbents, it is possible to examine these structures separately from the social element. In my study, school and social structures were in place and had an effect on the cohort of incoming learners in terms of class divisions, allocations of classrooms and teachers, as well as regulating their time by means of official timetables. These structures were operating long before my cohort of grade 8s started at the school. In addition, the learners' attendance at this particular school was structured by geography, race, social class and even gender. Thus it is possible to examine some of these structures that existed before the study. The difficulty according to Archer is

To distinguish between structural conditioning and the emergent powers of different categories of people (primary and corporate agents as well as individual actors). For it is the interplay between the powers of the 'parts' and the powers of the 'people' which is decisive for the outcome and not merely whether this can be characterized as reproduction or transformation but in order to explain the precise form of structural elaboration to take place". (Archer, 1995: 179).

In this study, the interplay between learners' and structures will be examined in order to explore the way this contributes to change in learners' identities as readers.

The 'parts' comprise both structure and culture. Figure 2.3 above can therefore be adapted to show cultural conditioning at T<sub>1</sub>, the interaction of culture and agency between T<sub>2</sub> and T<sub>3</sub> and the elaboration or reproduction of the cultural system at T<sub>4</sub>.

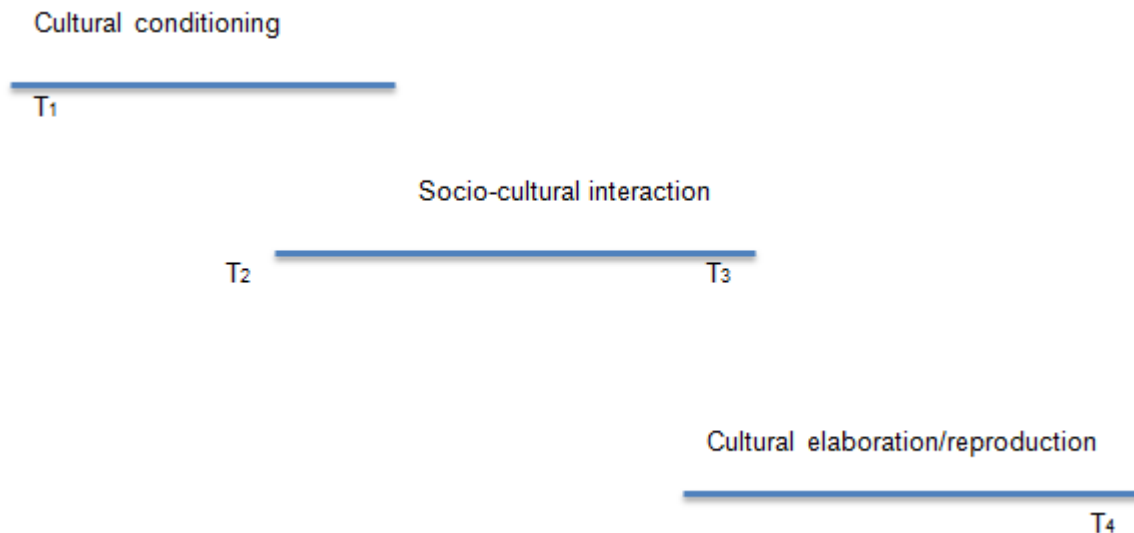


Figure 2.4 The morphogenesis of culture (from Archer, 1995: 193)

### 2.3.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity has been recognised as contributing in varying ways to critical realist thinking. Sayer (2000: 53) writes that “realist social science requires reflexivity” particularly in relation to what is being researched. Corson (1991), drawing on Bhaskar (1989, 1998), reminds us of second-order monitoring and retrospective commentaries on actions. As mentioned, Corson (1991) suggests that this retrospection accords special status to people's own accounts of their behaviour and that this surpasses accounts established through the third person, or researcher's observations. People's reflections of their own behaviour would be more valuable to the researcher, in giving insight into the research and simultaneously it values the participants' knowledge and contributions. Through this process both parties contribute to knowledge production.

When Archer's morphogenetic model is applied in social science research, agential exercise of reflexivity is a contribution to morphogenesis or morphostasis. Similarly Bhaskar acknowledges the importance of reflexivity and language in any social studies. He suggests that any analytical advances are dependent on a recognition

that “(wo)man is a self-interpreting and self-motivating animal, a member of a story-telling species, whose language, beliefs and stories are in some way necessary for and productive of his or her life” (1986:160), thus foregrounding reflexive and linguistic potential. In addition to a researcher employing reflexive techniques in the course of the research, Danermark *et al.* advocate the use of methodologies requiring participant reflexivity, which could include journals and reflections.

An awareness of reflexivity underpins much of the educational and social research using critical realism without the concept being explicated. More recently Archer (2007b, 2007c, 2010) has examined this concept more closely. She suggests that reflexivity takes the form of the ‘Internal Conversation’, inner dialogue or self-talk. By means of this inner dialogue we reflect on ‘ourselves in relation to society’. This process makes us active as we ‘exercise some governance’ rather than passively having things happen to us (Archer, 2007b: 42). In Archer’s expatiations on this concept she defines reflexivity as “*the regular exercise of mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa*” (italics in original, 2007c: 4). These deliberations and attempts at understanding then lead to future actions. The inner life (or internal conversations) is accorded a prime position in Archer’s view. She recognises it as having “temporal priority and causal efficacy”. Thus “reflexivity is the means by which we make our way through the world” (Ibid: 5).

This study was characterised by on-going reflexivity on my side as I reflected on the utterances and dialogue of the participants and planned responsive actions. The learners, as the main participants, were encouraged to engage reflexively from our initial meeting when they reflected on their reading history to our final class interaction where they reflected in response to particular prompts. In addition to written reflections, some learners came in pairs, groups or individually to reflect on the reading club process. So to paraphrase Archer, reflexivity was the means by which we made our way through the reading clubs.

### **2.3.3.1 Identity**

Within Archer’s social realism, reflexivity is activated in these internal conversations which are recognised as an emergent property of persons (or a PEP) “which

generates their *personal identity*.” (Archer, 2000: 194). Through interplay between people’s emergent properties, cultural emergent properties (CEPs) and structural emergent properties (SEPs), their social identity can be discussed. Identity and a sense of self go together as we navigate the natural, practical and social orders: through first and second order monitoring we establish our concerns in these orders and plan individual courses of action, in line with our personal identities. Through internal dialogue, in the form of internal conversations, “the first-order emotionality is reflexively transformed into second-order emotional commentary” (Archer, 2000: 221). So reflection on an initial emotional response via inner conversations, enables the individual to strike a balance, particular to each individual and so personal identity is shaped. Emotions and reflexivity work together in charting a future course as “our emotions go out before us to meet the future” (Archer, 2000: 202). The significance of the internal conversations becomes particularly relevant when examining learners’ journals as I show in Chapter 7. Initial emotional responses reflect learners’ concerns which are transformed, through second order monitoring, to a literary, of sorts, commentary and a literary identity. Identity can be understood to occur at all three Critical Realist levels. It emerges from cultural values and beliefs at the Real, is enacted in various ways by participation in events at the Actual, and is visible as experiences at the Empirical.

## **2.4 Conclusions**

Together social theories of critical realism and morphogenesis provide an in-depth ontology and an explanatory approach to my study. Echoing Archer's focus on structure, Bhaskar recognizes the importance of context when unpacking the 'epistemic value of experience' which he suggests is “dependent upon the ontological and social contexts within which the significant experience occurs” (1986:160). The context will be explored in detail in chapter 5, which describes T<sub>1</sub> of the study. Critical realism acts as an underlabourer in examining the interactions in the reading clubs making it possible to explore the way they worked to contribute to shifts in learners’ identities. The use of analytical dualism, or the separating out of structure, culture and agency in analytical purposes, allowed me to see how learners’ drew (or did not draw) on structural and cultural resources in order to engage with texts. The morphogenetic framework then allowed me to see how reading clubs worked over time in contributing to change.

## CHAPTER 3

### READING THEORIES

*“Literacy as the ‘ability to write and read’ situates literacy within the individual rather than society. As such it obscures the multiple ways in which literacy interrelates to the workings of power.”*

(Gee, 1996: 22)

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter I established the theoretical underpinnings of this research, namely critical and social realism based on the work of Bhaskar and Archer respectively. As mentioned, critical realism’s depth ontology recognises that there are structures and mechanisms at the level of the Real which give rise to events, at the Actual, and experiences, at the Empirical. This understanding allows me to abduct and retroduct from what is observed to suggest what underlying mechanisms or powers have contributed to what is seen and experienced at the Actual and Empirical. Archer’s morphogenetic/morphostatic framework provides further explanatory power. This framework artificially separates structure, culture and agency. This separation, known as analytical dualism, allows me to examine how agents exercise their own personal emergent properties (or PEPs) to interact with structures to activate structural emergent properties (or SEPs) as well as cultural emergent properties (or CEPs). So using analytical dualism meant I would separate the ‘people’ (the grade 8 learners) from the ‘parts’ (school and other societal structures, including technology, as well as discursively constituted understandings and beliefs in the domain of culture). Through learners’ interactions in reading clubs at the level of the Actual, I hoped to see changes in their reader identities

In this chapter, the focus shifts to understandings of literacy practices and their connections to identity. I have drawn on New Literacy Studies’ researchers, specifically Heath (1983), Scribner and Cole (1978; 1981), Street (1984; 1995; 2005) and Gee (1996; 2000; 2008) to explore a particular understanding of literacy as a social practice. I use these studies to show that there are many different practices of literacy and that the term ‘literacy’ cannot account for all these variations. I then consider understandings of ‘reading’ and ‘literacy’ in school settings with particular

attention to concepts of 'reading' in relation to literature. For this I draw extensively on Rosenblatt's (1978) reader-response theories and the possible role of novels in the lives of young adolescents. In addition, Cliff Hodges' (2012) reminder that the goal of English teaching research is to improve pedagogy with provision of fresh insights, is particularly relevant to this study. Like her study, the research reported in this thesis, is also an attempt to avoid any distanced survey or to measure reading with discrete decontextualized tests which tend to essentialise adolescents and overlook their engagement with reading. Using a New Literacy Studies' lens, I present a trajectory of literacy through the proposed twelve year cycle, culminating in the school leaving examination in South Africa. In the main, school literacy practices are geared towards success in these examinations, so challenges and strategies for improved school literacy, mark the learners' journey towards this goal. Reading clubs, as the literacy practice at the centre of this research, are examined as sites where learners can be inducted to alternative practices of talking and writing about books - and so develop and extend their identities as readers.

### **3.2 Concepts of literacy**

Concepts of literacy have changed through the years. Historically, one understanding of literacy claimed it was a marker of civilization (Goody, 1986) as it was linked to the temple and palace economies of the Ancient Near East. Goody claimed that writing was essential for "transformations of social organization" and thus writing enabled states to develop modern economies while also functioning as "an instrument of power and domination" (Collins & Blott, 2003: 19). In addition, throughout history – in the Western World – there have been claims that literacy results in cognitive development. Within this mindset, the extended essay was considered the pinnacle, according to Collins & Blott, as it was an 'autonomous text' with completely self-contained meaning. In contrast, detailed ethnographic studies of literacy uses in communities presented an alternative perspective on the social role of literacy. One such view of literacy as a social practice emerged from Heath's (1983) long-term immersion in three communities in the Carolinas in the south-eastern United States. Other studies focused on literacy within particular cultural settings (Street, 1984; Scollon & Scollon, 1981) and for different functions within the community (Scribner & Cole, 1978). These studies present literacy as complementary to orality; the focus shifts to how scripts and texts are used by

people in their everyday contexts. Their studies avoid any 'oral' versus 'literate' binary: in recording everyday literacy events they show how the oral and the literate mutually inform each other. In responding to Goody's (1968; 1977) claims, Street contends that notions of development pertaining to literacy normalize a particular type of practice which overstates the case for the outcomes of literacy in assuming that civilizing and cognitive benefits will necessarily follow. Instead he advocates an ideological model which foregrounds the uses of literacy. It is this ideological understanding, based on literacy as a social practice, which informs this research.

### **3.2.1 Autonomous versus ideological models**

Research by Street (1984) and Heath (1983), which recognises the social embeddedness of literacy events or practices, challenges any claims for the neutrality and objectivity of literacy. The belief that certain cognitive and developmental benefits accrue to literacy was labelled by Street as an 'autonomous' model. This model is characterized by a view of literacy as something neutral that can be *given* to children or other cultures. It is linked with the idea of progress and civilization as if "there are functions of language that are significantly affected by the mastery of a writing system" (Street, 1984: 20). These functions include claims that written language is not as context dependent, is more logical and less interpersonal, and has stronger truth claims, all of which Street debunks as part of an autonomous thinking model. Literacy for Street refers to "the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing" (1984: 1) and it is the social aspect that particularly challenges the autonomous model.

Street (1996: 2) argues that the autonomous model "disguises cultural and ideological assumptions" and presents these as though "they are neutral and universal". A narrow approach to literacy in school, privileges a certain understanding of literacy without considering its relevance or questioning its dominance. Those who do not master school understandings of literacy are considered in deficit terms – in part because they may be denied access to genres of powerful knowledge. Schools need to provide access for marginalized groups to the 'genres of power' as part of their mission of education. According to the New London Group (1996: 60), a literacy pedagogy that builds learning conditions "leading to full and equitable social participation" and that is informed by critical discourse analysis,

could question the value of dominant literacies. For the most part, learners in South Africa are taught to read in the early grades at school: however they will only become fluent and master dominant literacy practices – which are related to power – if they continue to practise reading. However, their social contexts may offer limited support for reading: therefore the reading club, which is the focus of this study, was essentially an attempt to intervene at the level of practice.

Street recognises the assumption, shared by development and educational programmes, that “literacy in itself – autonomously – will have effects on other social and cognitive practices” (2006: 1). He suggests that this autonomous approach is merely an imposition, usually of western or dominant literacy practices, on others. His ideological model, arising from his sensitivity to literacy practices in Iran, where he taught and researched for a decade, recognises that literacy “is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill: that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles” (*ibid*: 2).

Studies by Street and Heath show that *how literacy is practiced* in the community impacts on how the child understands literacy, and learning, when entering formal schooling. While reading can be understood as making meaning from text, be it print, visual, or electronic, it cannot be separated from the wider concept of literacy. According to the UNESCO report, *Education for all, Literacy for Life*,

literacy refers to a context-bound continuum of reading, writing and numeracy skills acquired and developed through processes of learning and application, in schools and other settings appropriate to youth and adults (UNESCO, 2005: 30).

While this global overview is useful, its positioning of literacy as generally a school-based practice can be questioned as it fails to recognize the authentic practices of literacy outside of school situations. It also contrasts with the opening quotation by Gee which recognises how school literacy practices are enactments of power and social control. New Literacy Studies theorists argue that “literacy practices are constructed within a social context, that literacy acts vary depending on who engages in them” (Belzer, 2002). School literacy is one of the “multiple literacies” available to learners but is often removed from more prevalent cultural and personal literacies (*ibid*, 2002). In fact, Belzer claims that school literacies are so far removed

from the realities of minority groups that they are an alienating practice, which could account for the so-called reading crises in South Africa. Literacy Studies theorists (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Gee 2008) see reading as one aspect of language use that is “inextricably woven into social action or practice” (Purcell-Gates, Duke & Martineau, 2007: 11). The next section, therefore, considers how literacy is a situated practice and how its context of use results in differing dispositions towards literacy.

### **3.2.2 Situated literacy**

Both Heath and Street juxtapose the contextualised practice of literacy with the technician, often individual, orientation encouraged in school practice. In fact Street (1984: 1) uses a broad understanding, as for him ‘literacy’ includes “the social practices of reading and writing”. Gee (2000) too points to reading as a situated practice that cannot be divorced from the context in which it occurs.

#### **3.2.2.1 Heath**

Heath’s ethnographic study of two working class communities of Trackton and Roadville, as well as the middle-class town people, illustrates how differently neighbouring communities practise literacy and its role in their lives. Trackton babies are surrounded by talk but rarely talked to, whereas Roadville babies are included in much baby talk. Questioning is used differently with few *Why* questions requiring children to extend their answers, as is the practice in schools, occurring within the Trackton community. Story-telling follows a set pattern within the Roadville families where children are prompted and cued to adhere to the adult script with no elaboration or deviation, whereas in Trackton, story-telling was a creative performance integrating local knowledge and familiar characters. Roadville stories were factually based with no encouragement towards flights of fantasy or imaginative retelling. In fact imaginative tendencies evoked disapproval as ‘telling a story’ or a lie. Roadville parents valued print literacy and apprenticed their children into becoming passive recipients of read-alouds; on the other hand Trackton families rarely read stories to children and their homes had few print resources intended specifically for them. Both communities valued schooling as a means of advancement - but literacy was practised differently in their communities from how it was practised at school. Within Trackton, literacy events were interwoven into group discourse where meanings were negotiated and synthesized using the

understandings of the group. Although some young mothers in Roadville read romances, this was done privately and never discussed or shared. As a result of their different orientations to literacy, children from both communities struggled to decontextualize and shift knowledge into different contexts and to link school literacy to the home and community. The rules for communicative competence learned in the home, did not align with school practices.

Heath concludes her study by noting that academic success depends on being a *contextualist* who can “predict and manoeuvre the scenes and situations by understanding the relatedness of parts to outcomes or the identity of the whole” (Heath, 1983: 352). She suggests that the children of both Trackton and Roadville arrived at school with community practices and orientations towards literacy which included, among others, interacting with adults, arriving at meaning, story-telling and answering questions. All of these were at odds with the mainstream school approach, to the extent that teachers did not understand the responses from these learners. Her study illustrates the formative role of home and community discourse and literacy practices in preparing children for mainstream education and the possible disjunctures between them. She points to the need for discussion around topics so that learners are apprenticed into school practices in a safe and supportive space, as youth today need “places of sustained talk with adults they can trust” (Heath, 1983: 373). Her research challenges the orality versus literacy dichotomy, as she shows how both are used differently and have a clear function within each community. Community practices give children a sense of belonging as they have learnt, to the satisfaction of their families, appropriate ways to interact and behave. Similarly, Scollon and Scollon’s (1981) work with the Athabaskans in Alaska also revealed that community values and identity are what children bring with them to school. Challenging these values and norms could require children to make an affiliation shift to be successful at school – at some expense to their home or community identity. Schools also have a responsibility, for Heath, to understand the different ways of knowing and doing and being that learners bring to school and, from this understanding, to make school practices more explicit.

### **3.2.2.2      *Scribner and Cole***

Scribner and Cole's 1978 study of literacy among the Vai people of Liberia found literacies related to different languages: these included Vai, an independent written language, Arabic, and English. Each of these literacies was studied to establish how it was learnt and used. English was the official language and script at a national and political level in Liberia but was not used widely in this community. Arabic was an organic part of everyday village life as the script for both religious practice and formal schooling for boys. On the other hand, Vai script was for secular and personal use - often between individuals in different locations. As Vai was not learnt in schools but rather from a friend or relative, Scribner and Cole hoped to disentangle literacy effects from schooling and thereby investigate claims for the cognitive effects of literacy. They define literacy as "a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it" (Scribner and Cole, 1981: 236), thus focusing on its social uses, rather than limiting literacy to schooling.

To summarise their results rather simplistically, in studying the effects of the literacies used by the Vai, Scribner and Cole found that the type and purpose of each literacy resulted in varying cognitive abilities. Much of the Qur'anic education, in Arabic, demanded memorization so its students became more adept at this, with some staying at a 'low' level of repetition with no understanding, while others progressed to advanced studies. However all had to progress through rote memorization phases. The Vai language was used for records and letter writing and was often taught for this particular purpose with lists and letters as the teaching material. Learning English involved leaving home to attend a Western-type government school in a different area as little English was evident among the Vai, though knowledge of it was seen as a step to advancement. From their studies of the effects of these literacies, Scribner and Cole could conclude that specific literacy learning results in a particular way of seeing and understanding - and thereby each type of literacy practice promotes specific skills or cognitive development related to the literacy practice. Therefore they contest the idea that literacy *per se* bestows cognitive advantage. Rather they found that literacy is practised differently in different segments of society and, as Heath observed, has particular local uses and functions and that different kinds of cognitive benefits accrue from each type of

literacy. Unlike Heath's study, Scribner and Cole focused on the writing practices of the different scripts and did not document a negotiated oral component.

These researchers have pointed to the importance of literacy practices outside the school environment, both in how they prepare the learners for the school experience (Heath, 1983) and in how literacy is practiced within cultures and classrooms. While this is a very integrated approach to reading, the experience of school-based learning to read can be quite different. Much importance and concomitant responsibility is attached to school-based literacy learning. In fact the UNESCO report (2005: 32) claims that "the principal route to acquiring literacy is through quality primary schools in which learning takes place": this ignores the importance of the home in preparing learners for school-based literacies and supporting their development. Quality schooling is recognised world-wide as a goal for the benefit of all children's learning. The UNESCO report (*ibid* 2005:138) also suggests that the spin-offs from literacy development include self-esteem, empowerment, political participation, economic growth, and improved health and reproductive behaviour, which all governments would want for their citizens.

It is this seemingly empowering result of literacy, which is most often seen as reading and writing skills, independent of context and background, that forms the backdrop for literacy documents produced by South African educational departments. This is in spite of work done as part of Prinsloo & Breier's (1996) *Social Uses of Literacy* project, which disputes this sort of thinking by showing how, for example, women continued to be pushed into subservient positions in the workplace in spite of their superior reading and writing skills on farms in the Western Cape (Gibson, 1996). Prinsloo & Breier's study (*ibid*) affirms the many ways in which literacies are practised and taken up by communities, identified by others such as Heath (1983), and challenges the simplistic 'reading and writing skills equal empowerment' assumptions underpinning many South African policy documents.

Focusing on, and privileging, a single literacy excludes those uses outside dominant, middle-class practices and serves to normalize a unitary understanding of literacy while marginalizing other literacy practices. The studies discussed above informed this study on reading clubs which drew on Heath's recommendations to establish a safe space for learners to be apprenticed into dominant school literacies, while still

valuing and recognising their existing community literacy practices. From a New Literacies Studies perspective, with an emphasis on equitable access and social participation, the focus therefore shifts to drawing on community literacies as resources and mechanisms in order to give meaningful access to dominant literacies via supported engagement and practice.

### **3.3 Gee and Literacy**

Gee has written prolifically on literacy issues (1990, 1996, 2000a, 2004, 2008). He discusses how literacy is more than being able to read and write as there must be some interpretation of the text, and with some meaning derived. The problem arises when different meanings are attached to the same text, though we would all concede that different interpretations and responses are expected of rich literary texts as continued reinterpretations from varied theoretical perspectives add to their richness and relevance. So, what does that mean for literacy? Gee and other Literacy Studies theorists (e.g. Street, Barton and Hamilton, 2000) suggest that people come to texts with socially embedded dispositions and practices. This then leads them to read the text in different ways, with different understandings emerging. This occurs by

one's being embedded (apprenticed) as a member of a social practice wherein people not only read texts of this type in this way, but also talk about such texts in certain ways, hold certain attitudes and values about them, and socially interact over them in certain ways. (Gee, 2008: 44)

Gee also points to the politicized nature of literacy in noting how it maintains social inequalities and ignores economic effects on literacy levels (2008). As indicated in his opening quotation, by 'literacy' Gee means far more than the ability to read and write. Instead literacy involves a more holistic orientation which he encapsulates as *Discourse*, (discussed below). His suggestion that the 'reading crises' are actually inequality crises in that schools in America do not adequately cater for the needs of poorer socio-economic groups and linguistic minorities, resonates with the South African context. He claims that children will have problems identifying with "teachers and schools that they perceive as hostile, alien or oppressive to their home-based identities" (Ibid: 39). His research illustrates how children's home practices of, for example, story-telling are often at odds with mainstream notions or school practices of story-telling (Gee, 1996; 2008). So story-telling is a literacy that is learned and

practiced differently in home and in schools (as was the case for Heath's communities) so it should not be separated from either the social context or setting in which it occurs or from how it was learnt. If schools want to induct learners into new ways of story-telling, and into dominant literacies, the New London Group suggests that making these explicit is the role of education. Gee's *Discourses*, as ways of speaking, behaving, interacting, valuing and reading, can be seen as "instantiations of particular identities (or 'types of people') by specific groups" (Gee, 2008: 3) : hence they provide an entry point into how learners position themselves and the identities they bring to school.

### **3.3.1 Discourse**

Gee's writings show how literacy is embedded in a particular context or situation. What Gee brings to the field is the refinement of the construct of 'discourse' and the articulation of identities that are played out in different socio-cultural settings, as being varied, fluid and evolving. For Gee, 'Discourses' (deliberately capitalised) involve ways of being, while small 'd' discourses refer to patterns of language, which correspond with a Bakhtinian view of chains of utterances (Gee, 2008). Big 'D' Discourses include ways of behaving, thinking and interacting, which vary according to each situation - and learners take up different positions that empower or disempower so as to 'fit in' to each situation, or not. Within schools, "children are "hailed" ("summoned") to be different sorts of students in different classrooms, even in different domains like literature or science" (*ibid*: 3). So within schools, children need to exhibit mastery of school-based Discourses, in the way they speak and dress and behave (especially as all these are regulated in the South African context) and may be ascribed other positions by being 'hailed', for example, as a 'poor reader' or a 'struggling student' associated with other Discourses. So learners may *take up* the Discourse of being a student, by virtue of entering the structured organisation of the school and wearing the uniform; they may be *ascribed* with membership of 'non-school' Discourses by, for example, scoring low marks in a test; or they may *take up membership of an alternative Discourse* which includes being a reader, if school structures afforded this to them.

If, as Gee suggests, each of these possible Discourses "represents one of our ever multiple identities" (*ibid*: 4), then schools are important sites of identity construction

for youth who may take up, or not, these various positionings as part of their evolving multiple identities. People acquire the Discourses of particular institutions or affinity groups by regular interactions until this affiliation, becomes embodied, thus echoing Archer's notion of the "primacy of practice" (2000). Therefore for this study I use Gee's big 'D' *Discourse* to refer to ways of behaving, choosing, which may or may not involving choosing to be readers in ways valued by schools.

Big 'D' Discourses, of course, have an ideological element and, in order to signal this, I also use the term 'discourse' (uncapitalised) not to refer to patterns of language, as does Gee, but rather to signal the shifting 'clumps' of ideas which construct ways of behaving, thinking, speaking, valuing – and, indeed, reading and writing – associated with a Discourse. In critical realist terms, these discourses are conceptualised as mechanisms at the level of the Real which contribute to the emergence of events (for example, a learner choosing a book to read) and her experiences of that event. Big 'D' Discourse can be seen to span all layers of a critical realist ontology because of this ideological component. Distinguishing between 'Discourse' and 'discourse' in this way, as my analysis in Chapters 6 and 7 will show, allows me to explore the ideologies inherent in Discourse more closely.

### **3.4 Understandings of Identity**

Gee suggests that Discourses taken up by people are multiple and evolving in line with their different fluid identities. In essence, he recognizes that we need to be different in different contexts and can fill many roles simultaneously (Gee, 2000b). For instance it is possible for a teacher to be a mother, a South African, a runner, a foodie, a bridge player, a soccer fan, and a literacy activist, all at the same time. He divides identities into four types according to their source, as illustrated in Table 3.1. (see below). This provides a means to talk about identities, while recognizing that these work together in complex ways and cannot be viewed as separate. Instead they are ways "to focus our attention on different aspects of how identities are formed and sustained" (*ibid*: 101). The first, Nature-identity, or N-identity, can be linked to genetic inheritance, like blood type or birth, as in a first-born child, or early development. Sometimes children are diagnosed with a 'problem' like ADHT and this is seen as their 'nature' as "the child's mind/brain as it has been modified by the

child's earlier physical or social environment" (*ibid*: 101). These only become identities if they are recognized and used by others as a way of knowing us.

	<i>Process</i>	<i>Power</i>	<i>Source of power</i>
<b>1. Nature-identity: a state</b>	developed from	forces	in nature
<b>2. Institution-identity: a position</b>	authorized by	authorities	within institutions
<b>3. Discourse-identity: an individual trait</b>	recognized	in the discourse/ of/with	"rational" dialogue individuals
<b>4. Affinity-identity: experiences</b>	shared	in the practice	of "affinity groups"

Table 3.1 Gee's Four Ways to view Identity (2000b: 100)

In comparison, Institutional identity (or I-identities, to use Gee's nomenclature) derives from people's positions within institutions and not their accomplishments – though these may overlap. Essentially these I-Identities derive their authority from structural organisations that have the power to 'author' positions "in terms of holding the rights and responsibilities that go with that position" (*ibid*: 102). Discourse identities are formed in terms of how people speak about us and foreground certain traits. These may or may not be linked to the N- or I- identities, but the basis here is the power of recognition by others whether within organizational structures, or not. Lastly Gee describes the 'affinity-identity' or A-identity which is characterised by sharing certain experiences or interests, as in on-line gaming or supporting Kaiser Chiefs. The focus here is on "distinctive social practices that create and sustain group affiliations, rather than on institutions or discourse/dialogue directly" (*ibid*: 106).

For Gee, Discourse and identity continually work together as they follow a unique trajectory through what Gee terms *Discourse space*.

That is, he or she has, through time, in a certain order, had specific experiences within specific Discourses (i.e., been recognized, at a time and

place, one way and not another), some recurring and others not. This trajectory and the person's own narrativization (Mishler, 2000) of it are what constitute his or her (never fully formed or always potentially changing) "core identity". The Discourses are social and historical, but the person's trajectory and narrativization are individual (Gee, 2000b: 111).

Gee's analysis provides a useful tool to consider identity as he recognizes the interplay between these possibilities, as well as how actors may make, take up, or reject these positionings. Adolescents occupy many different positions both in and out of school - and also in relation to school and popular culture literacies. As they explore different subjectivities, "they are positioned by others around them – whether parents, peer, or teachers – they enact various identities" (Dillon & Moje, 2006: 80) within the schooling structures. What Gee has offered here is an analytical lens to consider how structures and events might contribute towards the enactment of various identities. Within a critical realist framework, these identities would emerge from structures and mechanisms at the level of the Real and would be manifested as practices at the level of the Actual and experienced at the Empirical level.

### **3.4.1 Language, Schooling and Identity**

In her review of language and identity research among learners of English, Norton (1997: 410) recognizes how identity is often linked to "the desire for recognition". She draws on Bourdieu in recognizing the symbolic power of language for learners and also recognizes how learners need to 'invest' considerable energy in this learning: "investment" is used to "signal the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target" (411). Although her particular focus is on adult language learners' identity moves, her understandings would seem to apply in the multilingual context of so-called English home language classrooms where few learners, in actual fact, come from homes where English is used as the home language - and where the majority actually embody the desire for recognition and for the associated material rewards, as well as the symbolic power of English, and have invested accordingly.

Most schools constitute 'successful' learners as those who conform to particular ways of behaving and speaking and 'doing reading'. Learners who contest the dominant Discourse (as in ways of behaving and being) of the ideal student may be

seen as disruptive and difficult. Learners are therefore expected to conform to the “dominant discourses and identities preferred in the classroom” (Canagarajah, 2004: 120). The narrow regulating school discourse serves a reproductive goal as opposed to an espoused goal of development of the individual. Within this setting it is difficult to accommodate learners’ identities that are ‘multiple, conflictual, negotiated and evolving’ (Ibid: 117). Similarly, within cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), ‘Identity is a product and by-product of activity’ (Roth, Toibin, Elmsky, Carambo, McKnight & Beers, 2004: 51). This conforms with Gee’s understandings of identity development among adolescents as being fluid and vacillating in response to different social contexts and interactions.

Engagement with literary works allows students to negotiate ascribed identities and permeate the perceived boundaries. In Sutherland’s study (2005), the six participants used the text, *The Bluest Eye*, as a springboard to examine their ascribed identities as Black female adolescents. A sense of identity as fluctuating and flexible emerges through connections with the literature as the learners note intersections and difficulties with their own lives. The use of an ‘intersectionality lens’ in this study puts

complexity at center stage, recognising that intersections of social positions matter differently for different individuals at different times and in different contexts (Sutherland, 2005: 369).

In recognising the development of readers’ identities as they engage in interactions with different texts, research has focused attention on how the students became confident participants in the classroom reading practices (Rex, 2001); on how minority group members develop alternative identities while engaging in literacy activities (Norton, 1995) and on how adolescents engage with identity and representation through texts (Johnson & Freedman, 2005). Within all of these studies, learners are allowed many opportunities to interact with the texts through a personal response approach, thereby facilitating the growth of individual reading autonomy. Thus a focus on identity allows the individual reader to be foregrounded, while recognizing the particular focus or practice of each one. In addition, the socially interactive or communal nature of reading is recognized as a possibility for identities to emerge and strengthen.

Langer (2004) draws on Bakhtin (1981) to make sense of how students bring different voices and dialogues into classroom discourse. As students participate in varied learning engagements, they are afforded increased language possibilities and take these up in different ways within the school context. This drawing on the voices of prior learning and using these in new and unique ways, is an indication of the appropriation and internalization of this learning. Within the educational environment “students and teachers call upon the voices they have already acquired and are given opportunities to gain new voices” (Langer, 2004: 1041).

In ongoing identity work, learners draw on cultural artefacts, which are “inscribed by the collective attribution of meaning” (Bartlett, 2005:3), and could include objects like a crucifix or narratives like the Cinderella story or labels like ‘struggling reader’ which are often used in classrooms. Bartlett draws on Dyson (1997) to show how learners mobilized elements of popular culture, like superheroes, as important artefacts in their literacy development and identity work. She suggests that these figured elements are used to contest or maintain ascribed roles (Bartlett, 2005). Popular culture seemed to offer learners in my study attractive possibilities for alternative Discursive positions as they drew on radio and rap in their various presentations of self.

### **3.5 Literacy in Schools**

This section focuses on literacy practices in schools. This is based on the recognition that while there are different ways of practicing literacy in the home and in the community, there are also different literacy practices within schools and along the reading trajectory. Ideally these practices build on each other as all offer learners different ‘ways of being’ a reader.

#### **3.5.1 Reading trajectories**

The term *trajectory* in relation to *reading* situates reading at a time and place in a continuum that extends both back and forward, thus echoing conditions for Archer’s morphogenetic model. It suggests that a person’s reading has a history that has driven it to a particular point in time and that this impetus, or flight, will continue in some way and some direction. If reading is considered as an activity that occurs, in a school setting, in groups, then trajectories may be linked to participation within the

group (Greeno & Gresalfi, 2013). For grade 8 learners, experiences of school reading extend back to pre-primary and primary school involvements and are projected ahead to the literary reading of prescribed 'set-works' that constitute part of the curriculum in the final years of schooling: moreover at any one time this experience of school reading also extends across the curriculum in 'reading to learn'. The next sections trace a generalized trajectory by examining moving backwards and forwards along a continuum of reading, culminating in a comment on school assessments of reading.

### **3.5.1.1 Skills and practices in the early grades**

In the early stages of teaching reading in schools, instruction often centres on the discrete skills needed to decode texts. Paratore, Cassano & Schickedanz (2011: 110) suggest that the "literacy domains" essential to successful reading development include "phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary fluency and comprehension". A Department of Education (DoE: 2008: 11) handbook on *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades*, lists the five components of the teaching of reading as "[p]honemic awareness, word recognition – divided into sight words and phonics – comprehension, vocabulary and fluency". Similarly, Fang (2008) points to the importance of the 'Fab 5', namely phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension strategies, in the early grades but shows that knowledge of these is insufficient for middle or intermediate grades. He points to the need for explicit instruction in 'reading' after the early grades and particularly to meet the challenges of expository texts, thus suggesting the inadequacy of the 'Fab 5' in understanding meaning in content area texts. Goswami (2000) further explicates the role of phonological and lexical processes and shows how these are linked to rhyme and alliteration, metalinguistic awareness and tuition in phonemes to develop phonemic awareness and iterative progress in spelling and reading. This also reflects the playfulness of early reading, which is often at odds with the dispositions required later in the trajectory.

So the emphasis in the early grades is on practices to help young learners decode and thus make sense of what they are decoding. The balance of phonics and decoding with accessing of meaning is difficult to achieve, even in many effective education systems. Within the unevenly resourced schools and communities in a

changing educational landscape in South Africa, it is even more elusive. PIRLS 2011 shows how reading achievement follows resourced schools and homes, which echoes Cummins' (2000) and Gee's assertions that literacy and reading challenges emerge from socio-economic imbalances (Gee, 2008). This imbalance is exacerbated in the South African context by multilingual and multi-literacy challenges as well as uneven teacher training (Fleisch, 2007). Internationally, research by Cummins (2000) illustrates the importance of learners acquiring Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, or BICS, as well as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, or CALP, in a first language in order to transfer these skills to a second language. As CALP is located particularly in the school context, as indicated by the term 'academic', Cummins (2000: 7) defines this proficiency as "the extent to which an individual has access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling" and suggests that it is axiomatic that learners be educated and enliterated in their mother tongue. This has been echoed in the South African context by Alexander (2006; 2011), Heugh (2009) and Ramani and Joseph (2006) whose research has advocated mother tongue instruction and mother tongue enliteration as a means of equitable access to education, as well as constituting an issue of social justice. Despite research about educational and cognitive benefits of primary literacy and CALP in home language (or L1), parents and School Governing Bodies, SGBs, in predominantly English first additional<sup>5</sup> language schools, continue to opt for English as the Language of learning and teaching (or LoLT) from the fourth year of school.

### **3.5.1.2      *Intermediate phase reading***

After the supportive reading experiences of the early grades, reading practices and processes undergo a change from grade 4 onwards. As learners are expected to move towards more independent reading, many learners experience the 'fourth grade slump', exacerbated for many South African learners, by the switch from home language instruction to English as LoLT (Fleisch, 2008; PIRLS 2006, 2011). Reading lag or the fourth grade slump, culminate in the so-called 'Matthew effect' (Stanovich, 1986; Chall, Jacobs & Baldwin, 1991) where the weak get weaker and the strong get

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<sup>5</sup> In an effort to avoid being positioned as 'second' and therefore inferior, the term 'first additional language' has been adopted officially to denote previously 'English as a second language'.

stronger so that the gap between skilled and less skilled readers grows wider each year. There is a reduction in the formal teaching of reading and learners are expected to apply the reading practices, such as decoding skills, that they supposedly learnt in the Foundation phase. Reading challenges increase as new content areas are introduced, with their particular discourses and syntaxes which might be very different to those of the narrative texts read thus far (Fang, 2008). This is exacerbated if the focus on decoding did not include interpreting of meaning as part of the early reading practices.

According to Matjila & Pretorius (2004), the South African system reflects a developmental perspective where learners progress to longer, more complex texts with more challenging vocabulary. Belzer (2002) suggests that the school reading 'scripts', similar to Cazden's (2001) discourse patterns, estrange many learners from the practice and development of reading. The presumption that effective mastery of the 'Fab 5' will be sufficient for the kinds of reading needed throughout school, points to a narrow understanding of literacy, whereas, as emerges in my study, learners bring many different practices of literacy to the 'reading' process. So I would suggest that the presence of many literacies and literacy practices, needs to be recognized - and more importantly, to counter the slump that might occur, learners need many opportunities to engage and practise the varied and dominant literacies of schools, one of which is the reading and enjoyment of novels, or reading for pleasure.

### **3.5.1.3      *Intermediate and senior phase 'strategies'***

Several approaches have been suggested to further develop learners' reading abilities after the Foundation Phase. What these 'strategies' involve is adding certain practices with new orientations to literacy. This is achieved through an activity approach as well as through modeling 'think-alouds' to demonstrate how experienced readers process text. While 'think-alouds' may have been used in the Foundation Phase, the focus in the Intermediate Phase is on making comprehension thinking explicit so as to focus learners on making meaning from text. A strong argument is made for engaging the young readers because "as students become engaged readers, they provide themselves with self-generating learning opportunities equal to several years of education" (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000: 404). Moll (1990) points to the need to move from a skills-based approach to one that

focuses on the activity of reading. Drawing on a Vygotskian or socio-historic, as well as a New Literacy Studies perspective, he suggests that skills need to be located in meaningful activities –

[So], instead of basic skills, a socio-historical approach talks about *basic activities* and instantiates those that are necessary and sufficient to carry out the whole process of reading in the general conditions of learning (Moll, 1990: 8).

The benefits of think-alouds to demonstrate how readers monitor for meaning while reading a text, is explored at length by Keene & Zimmerman (2007). They identified seven strategies or practices that effective readers use to ensure they are reading for meaning and comprehension rather than just decoding words. They advocate these becoming regular reading practices to offer learners multiple opportunities to engage in these strategies meaningfully. These practices should not stay at the level of strategy but need to become an integral part of the reading experience to be developed in the intermediate phase.

#### **3.5.1.4      ‘Dialogism’ as a reading practice**

One of the explanations for the gains resulting from applying strategies is that they are “vehicles that enable students to engage in dialogue about the text” (Wilkinson & Son, 2011: 365). So, Wilkinson and Son advocate a dialogic understanding of ‘strategies’ where comprehension is a dynamic and relational process rather than an application of strategies. Dialogism, which originated in the work of Bakhtin (1981), recognizes the contributions and reiterations of the different parties which work together as part of a meaning-making process. Because language is a shared event, dialogue is centred on a relationship between parties. The position of language is critical as “through the medium of the first person pronoun each speaker appropriates a whole language to himself” (Holquist, 2002: 28). Thus the process of authorship or authoring a text is also a shared experience and Holquist claims that Bakhtin “uses the literary genre of the novel as an allegory for representing existence as the condition of authoring” (Ibid: 30). It is the joint contribution by the different parties in the dialogic process that brings the joint authorship into being. So knowledge is dependent on dialogic interactions as our accumulated wisdom is based on trusting the witness of others (Kumamoto, 2002: 74). Dialogue consists of

three elements, namely an utterance, a reply and most importantly the *relationship* between the two which connects them. This is a critical element in distinguishing dialogue from its more everyday synonyms such as conversation or speaking, which are contained in dialogism. So, dialogism could be considered as an alternative to strategy instruction, or as a means of understanding strategies as well as in itself being used for meaning-making in reading club interactions. As such it is one pattern of talk in comparison to more established, dominant classroom interactions, such as Cazden's (2001) 'IRE' discussed at 3.5.2.

So the intermediate and senior phases of schooling are sites of reading transition and challenge. Reading is no longer taught but is practised; some strategies that are used to encourage mindful reading and increase comprehension and dialogic approaches have been found to be useful. However within the South African context, lack of resources, as in non-existent or poorly stocked school and class libraries (Machet, 2001; Fleisch, 2007; Pretorius & Mampuru, 2007; Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Du Toit, Scherman and Archer, 2008); large classes and language and socioeconomic challenges (Fleisch, 2007; Howie et al., 2008), as well as teachers' literate habitus (Gennrich and Janks, 2013) mitigate against the take-up of reading practices by teachers and learners. Changes to the LoLT and the addition of content area discourses add to the reading load and the learner's need for reading practice. If learners in the early grades have practised decoding to access meaning, then this understanding of reading for meaning prepares them for what the practice entails in higher grades. On the other hand if schools have emphasized discrete skills like decoding words or using phonics to 'sound out' words, without any link to the learners' context or building up of meaning, then the schools have not prepared the learners for the practice of reading.

#### **3.5.1.5      *Reading Assessments***

Within schools, the most common form of 'reading' assessment is the comprehension test in which an excerpt from a novel or an extract from the newspaper is provided and learners have to answer set questions on the text. Learning to answer these assessments is a particular school practice which needs to be taught explicitly. These tests have become a dominant school 'literacy' practice which needs to be taught, reinforced and mastered for learners to be considered

successful (Granville, 1997). The test questions may range from multiple choice type questions to 'True' or 'False', to short written answers, but all expect the reader to find discrete items within the text, or to paraphrase or infer from the text (Granville, 1997). These exercises are used as an indicator of reading ability in relation to national goals. Often they are summative and provide a starting point or a base line against which future achievements can be compared. For example the 2005 PIRLS test (Howie, et al., 2008) revealed that South African grade 4 and 5 learners' reading is far below international levels. What this could indicate is that South African learners are exposed to different sets of literacy practices from those being measured in PIRLS and possibly also that learners are not practised in inferring from texts or in generating written responses based on textual evidence which is what is expected in PIRLS. Comprehension tasks are one literacy practice, valued at schools, which continue as a key mode of assessment until the school leaving examinations.

As well as a focus on *comprehension*, within the national school leaving examinations in South Africa, understanding and appreciation of 'set-work' literature is another focus. This reading of literature is evaluated by means of essay-type questions, exploring central themes such as 'the American dream', or contextual-type questions focusing on the development of character, plot or themes in a selected passage. Learners are required to answer one of each question type for either of the prescribed works<sup>6</sup>. So school practices need to prepare learners for this display of literacy, which is practised in the classroom by means of worksheets or tests of some kind which evaluate learners' understandings of the central ideas of the texts. Whole class assessment is the norm and though there may be more group work in the lower grades, most tasks are assessed in some or other way - and this assessment tends to be more individual-based as the learner progresses. So the teaching and learning of a work of literature, in the form of the set-work, is a particular school practice to prepare learners for an examination. From early in high school learners are constituted as successful readers by their performance in this specific literacy practice.

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<sup>6</sup> Since 2010, these prescribed works have included *The Great Gatsby* and *Othello* and although there are other choices, learners need only answer on one novel and one play so schools tend to exhaust these 2 texts and ignore other options.

Final school literature assessments follow the essayist tradition (Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Gee, 2008) and are far removed from the primary Discourse of the majority of South African learners. Using Heath and Street's research, we can assume that the decontextualized discursive essays and responses required in school leaving examinations favour a particularly middle-class orientation towards literacy which has become established as a so-called neutral measurement of appreciation of the literature studied. In contrast to this, Casey's (2008) research reports on learners choosing how their final response to a literary work could be assessed. She reports on a class where learners can choose between the option to

create a final chapter, develop a Venn diagram comparing yourself to another character, develop a game around the plot of the novel, create a multiple-choice test to administer to others (Casey, 2008: 291).

Unfortunately however, in South Africa, equipping learners for the challenge of examinations involves preparing them for a particular essayist-type assessment which leaves little scope for creative alternatives in the higher grades.

Within school, literacy practices are introduced through teacher-led interactions so it is useful to consider the pattern in classroom talk that learners would have been apprenticed into in their schooling experiences. Cazden's observations as outlined below are established classroom patterns of interaction, as opposed to *dialogism*, described earlier as an alternative 'strategy'.

### **3.5.2 Patterns of talk**

Identity is regularly linked with speech. What is said, how and when it is said and in what context, all reveals something about the speaker. As Cazden (2001: 3) claims, "in each and every utterance, speech truly unites the cognitive and the social," - and each is an expression of an aspect of the speaker. Within the classroom, context learning is mediated through language and specifically through the teacher's use of language, as well as that of the learners. As one marker of identity, a focus on the learners' speech could be a useful indicator of identity moves but this is to some extent dependent on the teacher and what kinds of speech are allowed and encouraged. The traditional pattern of classroom interaction is a three part sequence of Initiation, Response and Evaluation, or IRE, which "best fits the transmission of

facts and routinized procedures” (*ibid*: 5). This pattern is quite dominant and is seen as a means of engaging the learners, in that learners are called on to answer questions. However, if *talking* is a means of grappling with *learning*, in the form of meaning-making and exploring understanding, then the IRE pattern does not usually allow for this. Dialogism, as an alternative pattern, which builds on shared utterances, would seem to use talk as a means to understand and learn. A pattern of talk, like IRE, in whole-class teaching, becomes an established practice so that learners are expected to answer a question to which the teacher knows the answer and on which they will be evaluated. In general, learners are conditioned to participate in this practice as indicative of being *good* students, which reinforces the thinking that there is one correct answer which the teacher knows.

In contrast to the school pattern of IRE talk, talk in the community, as illustrated by Heath (1983) and Scollon and Scollon’s (1981) work with the Inuit children, follows different patterns. The form of questioning, inherent in school practices, is also part of school-based Discourses which may be unfamiliar to many learners. Types of talk and of questions are recognized as inhering in different contexts, which even children recognize, as recounted in Scollon and Scollon’s work<sup>7</sup>. Group work may allow for other talk patterns such as disputational, cumulative and exploratory talk, (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997): however depending on the context, learners may default to IRE patterns in their group discussions.

Talk is a way of presenting ourselves to the world (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Different cultural groups draw on different practices of starting and ending conversations and deciding who gets to speak, which Scollon & Scollon refer to as ‘the distribution of talk’. Within identity research in literacy studies, referred to earlier, moves in identity are often linked to what is said. So through speech, learners enact different Discourses linked to their different identities. Similarly Chambers in *Tell Me*

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<sup>7</sup> Scollon asks his toddler daughter ‘How many mice are there?’ The Inuit children ask ‘Which school does she go to?’ even though they know she is too young for school. Scollon interprets this as the Inuit children identifying the particular kind of questioning (asking a question to which the asker already knows the answer) as a characteristic of school. The Inuit children recognized, in a way, that he was preparing his child for school uses of questions.

(1996) explores the power of talk and claims that children do not know what they think about a book until they talk about it. He emphasises the essential role of *talk* for sophisticated adult readers and reminds us that shared enthusiasms or puzzles or connections may drive the shared experience of a novel:

Booktalk is a way of giving form to the thoughts and emotions stimulated by the book and the meaning(s) we make together out of its text – the imaginatively controlled messages sent from the author that we interpret in whatever way we find useful or delightful (Chambers, 1996: 12).

His comments on children’s reflections on books also point to the value of sharing understandings and becoming part of a “community of readers” who cooperate to share and develop their interpretation of the text (*ibid*: 17). This resonates with Heath’s study where communal literacy practices of sharing understanding were normalized within the community. Chambers’ word ‘booktalk’ seems to offer a useful umbrella term for all talk pertaining to literature and I use this as shorthand in Chapters 6 and 7.

### **3.5.3 Understanding the reader**

I have chosen to focus this research on the activity of *reading* as a verb, rather than on the noun the *book* (i.e. what is being read). So similar studies might be titled *book clubs* or *reading circles*, and follow very similar practices. My central interest was on the practice of ‘reading’ the chosen texts and what transpired through this interaction with the texts. While the title, *reading clubs* might occlude the focus of the reading, *the books*, it is important to note that what the learners read in their reading clubs were novels or shorter texts related to novels, such as ‘blurbs’ or extracts.

This section focuses on practices of reading literature. Rosenblatt’s reader response theory is well recognized as valuing the reader’s feelings and reactions above any kind of standard assessment (1978; 1983). Her concern for the individual’s reaction to the literary work resonated with the reading club practices in this study. Guthrie and Wigfield’s (2000) work on reading and engagement supports the notion of readers’ personal responses as a manifestation of engaged reading. This notion of engaged reading is spelt out more specifically as involving “dispositions for thinking deeply and using strategies for thinking about text” (Guthrie, 2004: 4) which can be

seen as active, intent and energized reading. Both of these perspectives align with a New Literacy Studies stance as they presume a practice of reading involving meaningful engagements with text where the individual, or group, relate what they read to their lives and context in an iterative meaning-making process. Both 'reader response' and 'engaged reading' are also socially conditioned practices that position learners and texts in an interactive engagement, so need to be seen as alternatives to the IRE practice which Cazden (2001) identifies as a dominant classroom practice.

Rosenblatt's transactional and reader response theories foreground the role of the reader and the reader's response. In fact it is the reader's active engagement with the text that is central to her theory. She suggests that once the creativity of the author has ended, what remains is a text which needs a reader to bring it into being as a 'poem', for example (Rosenblatt, 1978). She suggests that reading a literary text involves a shuttling between different parts of the text and what the reader brings to the reading as associations, experiences or feelings evoked by the text. So the text serves as a stimulus "activating elements of the reader's past experience... both with literature and life" (*ibid*, 1978: 11) and with the text as the blueprint in organizing what is selected and retained. Thus the "transactional phrasing of the reading process underlines the essential importance of both elements, reader and text, in any reading event" (*ibid*, 1978:19). The individual reader's aesthetic response is critical with literary texts; no one else can read a poem for the reader: a personal interaction is needed. The transactional understanding of the reader's response both "preserves the importance of the text, and permits a dynamic view of the text as an opportunity for ever new individual readings" (*ibid*, 1978: 130). Rosenblatt's theories of reading literature informed my understanding of what the reading clubs could do. Rosenblatt (1983) recognizes the particular value of literature in our understanding of human experience. Talk in the reading clubs built on this notion of recognizing and extending the individual's response to the text. There was no established interpretation or guide to interpreting the texts available, so readers could draw on their own cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds or 'schemata' in their discussions. If learners are to develop a response to the text, this valuing of responses needs to become established as a practice with many opportunities to engage with literature. Instead of the reader being displaced to the margins of the

reading process, reader-response theories place the reader in a central position. Through dialogic interactions with the text the readers could explore the world and their own understandings through the medium of literature (Twomey, 2007).

Research into reading literature, and specifically novels that learners can connect with, can be motivating if practices of identifying with the reading are established. Verden (2012: 620), in particular, promotes literature that students can recognize as a means to “model how to behave in certain situations”, as a resource to develop resilience and as a “key strategy for promoting children’s emotional intelligence within the classroom environment”. She shows how personal connections with literature are reflected in classroom discussions and interactive journals. She claims (2012: 621) that

through sharing targeted and relevant literature during read aloud, these students were able to find a voice through characters in stories and share their experiences in cathartic ways.

Through these classroom practices learners can be socialized into using literature to understand the self and one’s position in the world. As a practice it serves to motivate learners, who see their own problems reflected in literature and it can enculturate them into appropriate responses to these life challenges, as portrayed via a novel or a short story.

### **3.6 Reading Clubs**

Reading clubs are grounded on a social experience of reading. As Gee (2000a: 196) suggests when considering situated learning, “knowing is a matter of being able to participate centrally in practice, and learning is a matter of changing patterns of participation (with concomitant changes in identity)”. So the shared experience of reading, whether through dialogue with a parent, teacher or with peers, is an enactment of this social experience. From a learning perspective the small group structures of reading clubs should allow for more student participation than whole class teaching can afford. If talking is critical to thinking and understanding, then maximum participation of learners would be a goal for all teachers. Langer (2004: 1046) recognizes the importance of students’ interactions within group dialogue as

students bring their personal, cultural and academic knowledge to the interaction as they play the multiple roles of learners, teachers and inquirers, and in thus doing have an opportunity to consider the issue at hand from multiple perspectives.

So, as a classroom practice, reading clubs aimed to induct learner into a specific set of social practices as active participants in their own clubs.

When reading club practices have been established, learners shift from a focus on the correct answer to ownership of the discourse. What is valued in this literacy discourse also includes ways of acting and thinking that are accorded specific status as being indicative of learning. So in addition to a reader-response appreciation, learners also need to appropriate a stance of a 'skilled' or 'academic' reader by demonstrating that they can,

step back from the texts they are reading and connect them to others. They discuss ideas and themes without referencing their emotions and basing their ideas on likes and dislikes and don't display emotional involvement with text or argument. They frame their statements in a dispassionate, third-person rhetoric and support their ideas with evidence such as direct quotations from scholarly works, which they know will resonate as relevant with their teachers (Williams, 2006: 341).

Williams recognises how culture and context influence how we approach literary texts and that the stance described above, indicates how learners manifest their control over this specific literacy practice.

In addition to the social nature of reading clubs, they also offer support for learners to engage meaningfully with texts. According to Casey (2008: 292), "[l]iterature circles and reading clubs offer successful paradigms for supporting student's engagement with fixed texts". Both the social relations and the intellectual engagement need to be recognized as key elements in the practice of reading clubs. Reading clubs also become sites where learners can engage in reading books and talk, as well as write about them in an integrated literacy practice. These aspects, as well as different reading club configurations, are discussed next.

### 3.6.1 Varieties of reading clubs

Various models of 'reading clubs' are discussed in the literature. At the one end of the continuum, to give learners more support in sustained silent reading, Parr and Maguiness (2005) suggest that an instructional conversational model where the teacher engages with the reluctant learner in evaluating book choices and offering real support, would be most motivating for learners. These conversations work counter to the dominant *IRE* discourse pattern identified by Cazden (2001), and instead focus on discussions aiming for responsiveness and joint authoring of texts by the learner and teacher. Parr & Maguiness's (2005: 99) model was not a learner-led reading club, but rather a deliberate intervention by teachers to talk with learners and "make explicit the practice of choosing and engaging with texts". This interaction served two purposes: firstly it engaged and affirmed learner's thinking about literature and secondly "instances of thought situated the student as a particular kind of reader" (Ibid, 101) who makes choices about selecting novels to read.

Other instances of 'reading clubs' along the continuum, take the form of classroom-based 'reading circles' which use group work to bring learners together to share and explore (Cumming-Potvin, 2007). Within this Australian study, learners' out of school literacies were woven in to school-based practices which accommodated the multi-literacy masteries that the boys in this study brought to the group. On the other hand McMahon and Raphael's (1997) edition on book clubs offers a rich exploration of how such reading clubs use modelling and scaffolding by teachers to develop possibilities for learners to interact meaningfully in relation to texts. These teacher-led 'Book Clubs' were carefully theorised and based on constructivist social pedagogy which resulted in an on-going focus on learners' talk to understand how various students were taking up the challenges of the texts, making the texts meaningful in their own lives, and making connections between texts. Similar to Cumming-Potvin's 'reading circles', these 'Book Clubs' involved the class of learners reading the same text but also exploring them in small group talk, guided by teacher prompts and modelling. Class activities included 'fishbowl discussions' and 'community share' as sites to demonstrate and familiarize learners with new ways of engaging discursively with texts (McMahon & Raphael, 1997).

Kong & Pearson (2003) trace the development of literature-based instruction back to the 1980s as an alternative to a skills-based approach. Using literature was a specific practice which valued literary works, in line with Rosenblatt, as both 'mirrors and windows' of our human experience. *Literature circles* (Burda, 2000; Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005) or *literature clubs* (Vyas, 2004) were sites for an exploration of literacy and identity especially bi-racial identities, or for considering new opportunities for agency, especially for girls (Cherland, 1994; 2009) or women (Twomey, 2007). *Book clubs* (O' Donnell-Allan & Hunt, 2001) were also a preparatory site for teaching where student teachers and young adults engaged in literature discussions together and problematized what constituted young adult (YA) literature. In contrast Casey (2008) focuses on learning as the central purpose of engaging with a variety of texts, and with literacy seen as a tool in her study of *learning clubs*. Through social interactions and joint contributions to meaning making, learners were scaffolded in understanding texts and then demonstrating that understanding via a variety of literacy tasks. Many of these examples are school-based, often occurring in the classroom and led by a teacher-figure. In contrast, the Nal'ibali reading clubs (Alexander, Bloch, Jogee, Guzula & Mahobe, 2011) in South's Africa's Langa township offer an informal Saturday morning *reading club*.

In general these different forms of reading groups offer a safe space for negotiating understandings of the texts being read, and for induction into sets of specific practices. As an alternative to the teacher-led classroom, they allow more room for learner participation as all encourage joint explorations in the sea of literature. These practices value personal response over 'correct answers' that need to be couched in 'appropriate literate discourse'. As such, Twomey (2007) suggests that the relational space of reading groups offers alternative ways of being a reader. She sees reading clubs as allowing for a departure from the school-valued, public and masculine ways of being a reader, related to power and privilege, towards a more negotiated literary experience where a genuine 'transaction' is constructed between the reader and the text.

So whatever the name, varieties of reading clubs offer rich possibilities for enacting literacy. The use of texts linked to student-led talk, supported or followed by written reflections within a classroom focused on aspects of books, could provide an

immersion in the world of literature. The reading clubs that are the focus of this research, drew on various of these examples, particularly the 'Book Clubs' of McMahon and Raphael, but had to adapt to the exigencies of our particular situation, as will be explained. These elements: the novels, the talk and the writing, were all critical aspects of the reading clubs, so each needs to be considered independently.

### **3.6.2 Texts in reading clubs**

Much of the research on reading clubs presumes an availability of suitable texts. Having quality texts with youth appeal available is an ideal starting point for a study on reading clubs, if the goal is to develop engaged readers who have experienced the power of novels to take them to new lands and to provide experience of new worlds. A wide variety of texts as well as reader autonomy to choose is recognized as the bedrock of developing independent readers (Casey 2009; Guthrie, Wigfield & You, 2012; Denzin, 2013). Through exercising their agency, within the structure of classroom reading clubs, learners can engage dialogically in the social space of the classroom. Choice of text is recognized both as a motivating element as well as an exercise in agency. When novels are being purchased for reluctant or unpractised readers, knowledge of individual youth interests is a determining guide (McGaha & Igo, 2012; Denzin, 2013). McMahon & Raphael advocate the use of *trade* books for their book clubs as authentic texts for children. They avoided simplified or basal readers as potentially limiting as their vocabulary is reduced, and their syntax controlled. Even in book clubs that cater for linguistically diverse (Brock, 1997) or special needs learners (Goatley, 1997), such learners showed preference for trade books, with special attention to well-written classics or award-winning titles, such as *Roll of Thunder Hear my Cry*, by Mildred Taylor (1976). Often the entire class read the same title, which facilitated fishbowl and community share activities (McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Kong & Pearson, 2003). Others allowed learners to select titles for their group – which sometimes resulted in a lack of consensus between boys' and girls' preferences (O'Donnell-Allen & Hunt, 2001), or some found suitable titles in school book rooms. Some research groups obtained funding for the purchase of titles and could then obtain teacher recommendations and scour recommended reading lists for those that would appeal and challenge the learners (McGaha & Igo, 2012). All these international studies presumed that accessing appropriate titles and securing copies of the requisite texts would be an early step in the process. In

contrast, in this study, we had no funds to buy appropriate titles and so adapted our reading club structure so that each group would read a different title. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

### 3.6.3 'Booktalk'

Talking about texts in small groups allows for more learner involvement. Parr and Maguiness (2005) used the notion of *instructional conversations* to generate authentic inclusive conversations which allowed participants to contribute to 'authoring' the text. So, for them and their participants, *text-talk* was a means of exploring agency and identity. The talk itself also functions as a scaffolding mechanism as the learners explore and share responses in their groups. Ideally learners' contributions are valued and recognized and together learners move towards deeper understandings and are able to integrate new ideas into their thinking. McMahon's explorations of the 'social' in book clubs recognized that the "book club is not simply encouraging *more* student talk but a high quality of student discourse related to texts" (1997: 91). Her exploration of book club practices valued learners' exploration of literature and use of literate talk. Learners were encouraged in their book club interactions to engage in literate talk as this "fosters greater engagement with texts, higher motivation to read, and more meaningful interactions surrounding texts with among older children" (ibid: 91).

Drawing on Rosenblatt (1938/1976), McMahon & Raphael (1997) recognize the transactional nature of reading as the interaction of the reader with the text. This recognizes what the reader brings to the text while an on-going engagement with the text involves "an active reader constantly working to achieve meaning" and this "[P]ersonal response must be elaborated through a social exchange of ideas" (ibid, 1997: 14). Their book clubs sought to introduce new classroom practices by scaffolding learners into new ways of engaging with literature. They had observed how limited some discussion groups were, especially during initial meetings as they 'transitioned' to these new practices. Particular challenges ranged from a superficial response that failed to engage substantively with issues, to ignoring certain members and to unsupportive or unproductive behaviour (ibid, 1997: 100). As a result the teaching team planned strategic support in the form of explicit instruction, modelling and scaffolding to facilitate literate group discourse. So book club

practices were supported in order to engender particular dispositions towards books and book discussions - and to be successful these required investments of teaching and time.

The role of talk in developing literacy skills, and in particular in academically demanding responses to literature, is explored by Applebee, Langer, Nystrand and Gamaron's cross-state study (2003). In their advocacy for *discussion* as a scaffold for understanding, they suggest that comprehension be seen in terms of an on-going development of understanding a text which Langer (2004) terms *envisionment*. This involved links to prior knowledge and experiences, and to questions and tentative or evolving understandings of the text. As these were inchoate, they could change on a re-reading, or after reflection or discussion.

#### **3.6.4 Journal writing in reading clubs**

The practice within the schooling system is to measure learners' progress regularly through what is conceived and conveyed in writing. This establishes writing as one important indicator of learning and progress. So learners need on-going practice in writing to be able to use this both as a means to reflect their learning and as a means of exploring their own learning. The literature on writing suggests that reading club practice should include writing personal responses to text focusing on their relevance to the lives of readers (McMahon & Raphael, 1997; O'Donnell-Allen & Hunt, 2001) and providing multiple opportunities to write (Langer, 2004), while integrating ideas and responding to prompts (Parr and Maguiness, 2005). Writing is also in line with Freebody and Luke's (1990) roles of the reader which involve being a text analyst as well as a designer.

In examining identities in transition, Hutchings (2006), reiterates claims by Thorpe (2002) that through engagement in the process of journal writing students take up roles of 'non-reflectors, reflectors and critical reflectors'. She points to the need for tertiary students to become critical reflectors who can critically engage with knowledge and with their own assumptions to produce new perspectives, and that for many high school leavers, education was about the transmission and replication of knowledge. Brockbank and McGill (1998: 54) suggest that new knowledge emerges from social constructive interaction and that by means of a reflective journal

with a teacher, learners begin “the journey to greater agency, autonomy and independence rather than remaining dependent and passive”. Hutchings distinguishes between different types and affordances of journal writing in contributing to the development of critical literacy and a literary identity. Engagement in a dialogic journal allowed her students the space to engage with academic issues as well as with their lecturer on these issues. Similarly Fisher and Frey (2012) found that expecting learners to reflect in writing allowed them to synthesise their thoughts. This writing could take the form of a weekly letter to the teacher or a journal or blog, but writing expectations were established. In support of writing, their study also used teacher modelling of ‘writing aloud’ to make the writing process more explicit: “writing aloud, like reading aloud or thinking aloud, invites the students into the teacher’s mind” (Fisher & Fry 2012: 592). Journal writing in educational contexts also allows learners space for private communication, either for their own reflections on learning, or to share insights privately with a teacher figure. In this way journals can become a rich resource, “facilitating both the learning process and the research process” (Granville, 1997: 477).

### **3.7 Conclusions**

Various literacy orientations provide an important backdrop to this study. Research in situated literacy reveals the importance of familial and community practices and the extent to which these prepare the child for school and community literacies. By grade 8 the young teenager may have been taught to read using phonics and phonemic awareness and may also have made the transition to reading to learn in the upper primary school. On the cusp of adulthood, these young learners look ahead to completing their school leaving examinations and getting a further education.

Schools employ particular practices of reading which need to be made explicit to learners if they are to get access to this dominant practice. In addition they need the necessary material resources to engage in these practices. In schools, particular practices of reading are normalized, thus school reading works as a gate-keeping device, with the final examinations requiring essays in response to works of literature, as well as demonstrations of prowess in comprehension tests. Reading clubs in schools can work to broaden learners’ experiences of reading literature while providing supportive access to dominant practices, and in so doing, establish

habits of reading for pleasure that will continue for life. Through supportive sharing in reading clubs, and social negotiation of understanding, learners are scaffolded and their responses valued, in reading club spaces. Through oral and written interactions, learners develop voice and agency in response to the reading club texts and thereby enact identities in relation to reading. So, in critical realist terms, learner engagement with reading in the class (as an event at the Actual), draws on values, beliefs about reading from the cultural domain (at the level of the Real) to make sense of the text. Learners bring particular schooled dispositions to their grade 8 classrooms, and draw on these ways of being a learner or a reader, in their classroom interactions. These emerge in the reading club events as learners engage in a social practice of reading. Learners exert their agency in mobilising existing, and often strongly held and competing Discourses, with alternative ways of being a reader in reading clubs. Over the period of the reading clubs, from  $T_2$  to  $T_3$ , learners' use of agency in mediating between cultural and structural domains as seen in discussions and in journal writing, will be the subject of Chapters 6 and 7.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH DESIGN

“The model of causation that separates causes and conditions may be called the *interventionist* model. It is a model of idling conditions suddenly stimulated to action by an agent,”  
(Collier, 1994: 125).

#### 4.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, I presented the meta-theory that underpins this research, specifically critical realism and Margaret Archer’s social realism. In the previous chapter, Chapter 3, I drew on New Literacy Studies theorists, such as Street (1984) and Heath (1983) to show how ‘literacy’ can be understood to be multiple: there is no singular literacy, but there are different understandings and practices of literacies which are socially embedded in particular contexts of use. Schools value particular literacy practices – as well as ways of being – which might purport to be neutral and universal but are located in middle-class, generally western, understandings of literacy. As these are well established in schools they have become normalized so that learners are assessed in terms of how they measure up to one particular model of literacy. As I have described, research by Street (1984) Heath (1983), Scollon and Scollon (1981) and Gee (2008), shows how school literacy is only one form of literacy, and how children who are raised in communities that value orientations to literacy different from those valued at schools seem underprepared for school. They suggest the onus is on schools to build on children’s existing literacies while making the dominant school literacy more explicit to learners.

In this chapter I focus on methodology, which includes a “coherent group of methods that complement each other” (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004: 36), and that are consistent and applicable to my study. My concern was with reading clubs in a particular school and so a case study approach in which the “unique context of each case is retained and the data are interpreted within that context” (Maxwell, 2012: 114) seemed most appropriate. Social realists value context as the relationship between causal mechanisms is dependent on the context in which the mechanism operates (Maxwell, 2004b). As this is a qualitative study of a particular case it should

include descriptions of the interactions between many variables over a long period, a so called 'thick' description (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). I was an active participant in this case study of reading clubs and so my presence in itself can be considered an intervention (Maxwell, 2004). However the presence of the researcher can enrich the data as Maxwell (2004a: 254) also suggests that

Repeated observations and interviews and sustained presence of the researcher in the setting can give a clearer picture of causal processes, as well as helping to rule out spurious associations and premature theories. They also allow a much greater opportunity to develop and test causal hypotheses during the course of the research. Finally, such involvement is usually essential to the following strategy – the collection of rich data.

For convenience, case studies can be viewed as premised on a 'bounded system' (Gerring, 2007; Bassey, 1999) that involves 'the study of an instance in action' (Bassey, 1999). As my study focused on interactions in a classroom reading group over a certain time period it can be regarded as a particular unit of study. As a case study, it was intensive and evolved over time within a context or environment (Flyvbjerg, 2011). This study focused on one case, the reading club, but within this case my analysis of the data is presented as a series of vignettes or detailed cases of different groups' interactions within the reading club structure.

## **4.2 Case study**

As mentioned earlier, I had been assisting at Bay High School for four years prior to this study so the case study focused on one class of grade 8 learners as a "singularity conducted in depth in natural settings" (Bassey, 1999: 47). Each year I worked with the current English home language teacher and the cohort of grades that entered that year. Therefore the normal justification for selecting the school or participant sampling did not apply: I continued to work with the grade 8 teacher, who had joined the school six months previously, and her grade 8 class. So the study became "an intensive study of a single unit" (Gerring, 2007: 37). Suffice it to say that while this school is unique in many aspects, it also shares many common challenges with other urban schools that have experienced rapid post-apartheid demographic shifts, and continued limited resources. Reading clubs were introduced as a mechanism to engage learners in reading novels. As such they were a phenomenon that was studied in depth within its real-life context (Yin, 2009) and therefore

constituted a case study. Reading clubs were an example of ‘particularist’ research which focused on understanding learners’ interactions around the novels read. So this study attempts a qualitative focus, within a case study design, of learners in their natural environment, supported by ‘thick’ descriptions orientated towards understanding (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). Maxwell prefers the term *rich data* which he claims are varied and detailed data that “provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on and of the processes involved” (Maxwell, 2004a: 254). Case studies are a preferred method of research in response to questions involving ‘how’ or ‘why’ and can, according to Yin (1994), facilitate exploratory and descriptive analyses of data. In particular, a case study allows for rich data as its “unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artefacts, interviews and observations” (Yin, 1994: 8). This seemed suited to my study in examining *how* reading clubs contribute to shifts in identity. As my study involved working with learners over a lengthy period and recording their discussions, I hoped to generate a wide body of data. So this is an “exploratory qualitative case study” (Rogers, Marshall & Tyson, 2006) of a class of forty learners’ engagement with novels in a school reading club.

#### **4.2.1 The case for this case**

This study focuses on a particular group of learners at BHS from May to November of their grade 8 year. As such it is an example of a “spatially delimited phenomenon” (Gerring, 2013: 19) and a single unit “bounded by space and time” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011: 10). Stake (2005: 445) would refer to it as an *intrinsic case study* because “in all its particularity and ordinariness, the case is itself of interest” as the research focuses on those ‘living the case’. In this case, the study is bound by the grade level, grade 8, and is situated in the English home language class. This also meets the criteria of ‘singularity’ as it is the particular classroom and practices therein that are the target of this study. The research focuses on reading and reading-related practices over a period as the ‘instance in action’ and will attempt to arrive at generalisations that might apply in other similar cases of infrequent reading in English classrooms in disadvantaged South African communities. Case studies allow for ‘small generalisations’ based on the actions observed and relate only to that specific case. ‘Grand generalisations’ are attempts to extend the interpretation beyond the confines of the bounded system to inform similar other cases (Stake,

1995 in Bassey, 1999). So claims made from case study research should be made tentatively, as probable speculations only, and not as generalizable evidence.

What a clearly bounded unit of study offers is a focus on the local as Erikson (2011: 46) claims

Interpretively orientated (i.e., hermeneutic) realist ethnography presumed that *local meaning* is causal in social life and that local meaning varies fundamentally (albeit sometimes subtly) from one local setting to another.

As the *local* is often subsumed in a bigger picture, its value is often overlooked and voices are not heard. While arguments are made for the non-generalizability of case study research, questions should arise as to whether findings from a particular case would be found in similar studies and so the case study can be used to “address matters of value, power, and local detail as these are pertinent to local policy decision making” (Erikson, 2011: 53). Focusing on the local is of itself worthy of research. Voices and experiences of learners are lost in grand quantitative sweeps of tests and national exams and an insight into the local is lost. In contrast, this case study has a narrow focus on a particular context of contingently situated reading and it foregrounds the voices and experiences of the locals.

#### **4.2.2 The Case of Reading Clubs**

The grade 8 English home language class at a dual medium city school was the site for the reading clubs. As such, the grade 8 class can be seen to constitute a single case study with a single teacher. Within the class there were eight reading clubs and these, as well as the individuals within them, constitute the unit of analysis to be studied. If the class with the class teacher is the case, then the reading clubs are a structure, introduced as a result of my agency as a visitor to the school and with a long standing history of assisting the teacher. It is this structure that is the focus of this research. In critical realist terms, I will be exploring the interplay of this structure with other structures, such as social class, and apartheid, and with mechanisms in the discursively constituted cultural domain.

More specifically I will be looking at the way learners exercise their agency to draw on the structure of the reading clubs, as well as on other structures and discourses in the domain of culture, to effect changes in their identity as readers. The gender

composition of each reading club is indicated in Figure 4.1 *Nested contexts of reading clubs* (see below), as is the degree of participation. An 'x' instead of a '✓' indicates limited participation or frequent absence in the case of the learners indicated. So although all forty learners were included in a reading club, in effect the participation of thirty-seven will be included here. The clubs are described in more detail in 4.4.1. Sayer (2000) has pointed to the importance of geo-historical contexts and understanding part-whole relationships, so Figure 4.1 illustrates the wider context of the study. Understanding contexts helps to make relationships and responses understandable as they are embedded in the case being studied. As examples of qualitative research, case studies are "situational, revealing experiential happenings of many kinds" (Stake, 2005: 149) and the wider contexts are explored in more detail in Chapter 5 which presents the  $T_1$  of the morphogenetic framework.

The levels of context in Figure 4.1, form the setting for the reading clubs. Although the focus will be on interactions within the classroom or class setting, education is an open system so participants moved into the school and community context on a regular basis. Within these contexts other structures and agencies were at play and so the wider context of the reading clubs needed to be established.

A case study approach allowed for a research design in which different features or aspects could be brought together. In this case, learners whom teachers claimed 'couldn't read' were given opportunities to engage with books in reading clubs. The structure of reading clubs allowed for the emergence of new phenomena with properties that could not be reduced to its constituents (Sayer, 2000). The concept of emergence in relation to this study will be examined in more detail in the next section but it is useful to note how the intensiveness and immersion in the case study allowed for observations of emergence in learners' journal writing over time. Because a case study requires a detailed understanding of the 'case' being studied, it offers opportunities to examine the conditions and mechanisms that are the focus of research underpinned by critical realism, as well as the other conditions, and mechanisms, which may have been activated. As this reading intervention occurred in an open system, there may be many structures that were active at the time the clubs took place. In addition the same causal powers can produce different results

**School context:** Former 'Coloured' dual medium school on the edge of 'coloured' area; site of border crossing

**Class environment**

library space

Reading Clubs:

Class total: 40

Cheetahs 4 girls ✓* 1 boy x 4	5 Conceited Kids 4 girls ✓ 1 boy ✓ 5	Contagious Kids 2 girls ✓ 2 boy ✓ 4	Cool Cats 3 girls ✓ 2 boys ✓ 5
Pythons 2 girls ✓ 3 boys ✓ 5	Supreme Team 4 girls ✓ 2 boys x 5	Tigers 3 girls ✓ 2 boys ✓ 5	Youth Representatives 4 girls x 1 boy ✓ 4

Figure 4.1 Nested context of reading clubs

depending on how they were activated and on the different individuals involved at that time. So even in the same setting a duplicate study could have a different result at a different point in time with new participants. While advocates of case studies stress the importance of replicability in order to validate the research (Gerring, 2013), critical realism, on the other hand, does not demand regularity (Sayer, 2000; Danermark *et al.*, 2002). Instead critical realism demands an explanation of the causes in the instance being studied. As Sayer (2000: 14) says,

What causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we have observed it happening. Explanation depends instead on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions.

Therefore this study of reading clubs will examine what happened in the course of the clubs' operation and will try to identify the causal mechanisms that were activated in this process

#### **4.2.3 My Case**

Before engaging with the methodological specifics, "because we cannot shed our status as participants" according to Archer (2000: 193), I would like to foreground my own subjectivity and positioning in relation to this research. Although the data in this study was generated within the space of a year, in an attempt to 'close the system', it was in essence a continuation of interactions and engagements I had had with staff at the school over a period of four years prior to the study. In fact the study was initiated in response to a request from the school to help with grade 8 reading skills. By the time of the study, I was an 'inside-outsider' and on familiar terms with secretaries, the principal and some language staff. I had also piloted various reading interventions while being sensitive to the context of the school and the language teacher in whose class I was a visitor. Schools have various structures in place and there are established behavioural norms. Some are visible like teachers' morning signing of attendance registers in the staff room or notices reminding staff of test and exam routines and deadlines. As noted by Shipway (2011), educational systems are essentially open, so regulations and attempts to control the visible variables, like attendance times, learners' uniforms and appearance worked to close off other influences.

From a critical realist viewpoint the educational ‘experiment’ can be seen as an attempt to contain the ‘object of knowledge’ i.e. the learners, within the ‘laboratory’ of the school for a fixed period, 07:30 to 14:30, on a daily basis for twelve years. Suffice it to say that as an outsider I had to operate within the regulatory framework of Bay High school. My engagement with the school over the years also enabled me to understand the contextual profile of the school and to exercise agency in response to reading club developments. In critical realist terms, I worked with the learners and teacher to generate the data of the study at the level of the Empirical. I then worked with the data to abduct and retroduct in my analysis in order to try to understand the causal mechanisms and cultural properties at the level of the Real. Despite rich and varied data and careful analysis my account is still fallible as it does not claim to be the truth: it is only as true as the data and my (fallible) analysis allow.

According to Danermark *et al.*, awareness of prejudice is important in any hermeneutical study “as interpretation is dependent on the researcher’s earlier experiences, her theories, frames of reference, and the concepts she uses” (Ibid 159). In terms of my positioning in the study, as a former English<sup>8</sup> teacher I was aware that, as learners progressed through the high school English classes, they would be expected to read and engage with a selection of novels from the canon. English in grade 8 should in some way prepare learners for this trajectory. In addition to preparing students for examinations, ‘English’, or whatever language is chosen as the ‘home language’ should also prepare learners to think critically and to become active citizens. The Government policy on languages that applied at the time of the study was the Revised National Curriculum Statement, or RNCS of 2008. The aim of this policy was “to develop high-level knowledge and skills in learners” (RNCS, 2008: 11). It states

By using a wide variety of texts in different contexts, a high level of competence is demanded from a learner’s knowledge and application of the language. A text-based approach to teaching languages enables learners to

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<sup>8</sup> In the South African high school context the term ‘English’ refers to classes where the practices and use of the language are studied. This was traditionally divided into literature, language and creative writing as these are the areas of examination that the schooling system uses. There are no separate language arts or composition classes: it all happens with one teacher in an English, or other language, class.

become competent, confident and critical readers, writers, viewers and developers of texts (Ibid: 11).

In practice language classes in many under-resourced schools focus on practising grammar exercises (Hendricks, 2008) either copied from the board or in worksheets. The varieties of texts are often short newspaper articles or poems rather than books or opportunities for extended reading. In contrast, via the reading clubs learners were introduced to other literacies in the form of a variety of novels. This allowed for a combination of Department of Education concerns with plot, character and setting – what I shall refer to as the ‘discourse of the book’ – and also reader-response theory which advocates a personal connection with the text. This approach introduced a very specific literacy which seemed to satisfy school requirements, while developing an enjoyment of reading, middle-class as that may seem.

### 4.3 Critical Realism

Danermark *et al.* suggest that when studying a social phenomenon the critical question to ask is: “What are the fundamental social relations without which this phenomenon would cease to exist? And further: What can this object achieve?” (2002: 187). So, in studying the reading clubs as a structure at BHS I hope to understand the causal mechanisms and tendencies that were activated in the process. In order to do this I have made use of abstraction, and retrodution to separate data generated at the level of the Empirical into its components and, through redescription, have attempted to find the operative mechanisms behind events located at the level of the Actual and experiences and observations located at the level of the Empirical (Ibid). I have thus attempted to move from what I can access (the Empirical and the Actual) to what I cannot access empirically. Danermark *et al.* explain abduction and retrodution as different thought processes or analyses. Abduction involves interpreting an event from the basis of general ideas or concepts whereas retrodution is an inference which seeks to understand “*What properties must exist for X to exist?*” (2002: 97). They suggest that this could be answered by referring to conditions or structure at different levels of abstraction or by reconstructing social positions or “culturally acquired dispositions” (*ibid*: 97).

Collier (1994) points out the subtle distinctions between causes and conditions that might apply to this study. There is never only one cause as “[A] cause of an ‘agent

intervening' kind may have as its cause a long-operating tendency which, to the casual view, fades into the furniture of 'conditions' (Ibid: 126). So a 'cause' can be traced back to many pre-existing causes which may also involve tendencies already at work. Within this understanding the reading club intervention could be understood as an agent moving into a school with pre-existing conditions and with learners who have underlying tendencies to read – albeit in ways which differ from those of dominant school-based literacies – which are stimulated into operation in reading clubs. Therefore although the “notion of conditions is a relative one” (*ibid*: 126), it is a useful framing of the intervention which could help explain and understand the process. Describing the conditions and tendencies at play in the reading clubs provides explanatory power rather than predictive power. Collier also warns of the difficulty of explaining events to account for all antecedents to achieve closure. Either the study will try to accommodate all 'causes' making it too vast, or involve “eliminating complex entities by reducing them to their atomic components” which would be of no use. Trying either course would lead to “systems so vast that they exclude nothing and individuals so minute that they include nothing” (Bhaskar: 77 as cited in Collier, 1994: 129). It is also valuable to locate these within the confines of structure, culture and agency which provide the focus for the next section.

#### **4.3.1 Separation of structure, culture and agency**

In order to exercise the explanatory power of social realism, it is necessary to separate structure, culture and agency so as to be better able to recognise the constituents of each and the interplay between them. According to Danermark *et al.* (2002: 178),” [A] structure is made up of a set of internally related objects; a certain structure may in its turn be part of a greater structure”. In the same way social structures may be contingently in place and may be reproduced or transformed by people's interactions (Yeung, 1997). Social structures possess unexercised powers or 'tendencies', or SEPs in Archerian terms, that can be activated in response to particular events. These exist in an open system but may not be apparent while unexercised. At different points in time, different powers may be exercised. This recognition of the importance of the *temporal* in the interplay between structure and agency is central to analytical dualism. Following from this, Archer advocates separating the powers of social structures from our experiences of them, which are necessarily limited and flawed. In recognising that structure and agency will allow for

two different accounts, Archer, citing Bhaskar (1995), avoids the conflationist potholes discussed in Chapter 2<sup>9</sup>. What must be noted is that structure precedes contemporary agency and that many of those whose agency has contributed to today's structures, are long dead. In Archer's terms, "structure necessarily pre-dates the action(s) which transform it, and (ii) that structural elaboration necessarily postdates those actions" (1995: 168). This can then lead to another phase in the morphogenetic or morphostatic cycle in which structure and agency interact over time. So, in this study, learners beginning their high school careers at Bay High School, find certain structures in place before they commence as "social structures are the context in which action and social interaction take place" (Danermark *et al.*, 2002:181). Within the educational system a new cohort of grade 8 learners is enrolled in schools annually from January. Thus it is a relatively enduring phenomenon. Once learners commenced the academic year as occupants of the grade 8 position, they become "embroiled in a network of social relations" (Archer, 1995: 168). By entering the schooling system individuals contribute to its continuation and reproduction and thus sustain it. At the same time structures, and societies, can change due to the interactions of the agents within it. So the schooling system "lays down the conditions for the actions of the agents in each case" (Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 187), in the form of school rules or codes of conduct that prescribe certain behaviours. In addition there is much in the school system which is unwritten and taken-for-granted. This also structures much of the interaction that occurs within the larger system. By separating these less obvious elements a clearer understanding of the interplay between structure and agency can emerge. In their talk and in journal writing learners draw on familiar discourse patterns to make sense of their reading: hence, provision of many opportunities to discuss books in reading clubs and to reflect in journal writing was an ongoing process in the reading clubs. Examples of taken-for-granted knowledge could include diverse understandings and practices of homework, variations on school dress, different attitudes towards punctuality and attendance, and the role and practice of fund-raising in the school - all of which might be very different at BHS, with its fewer resources and its lower

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<sup>9</sup> Archer's model depends on the separation of structure and agency. If structure is seen as having more influence and social structure determines human interactions, it is termed 'downward conflation'. If social forces are accorded a determining role, that is regarded as 'upward conflation'. 'Central conflation' claims structure and agency as mutually constitutive and so inseparable.

socio-economic setting, from how these are seen and practiced in a more affluent school.

Within the school entity it is possible to separate out the various strands of structure, culture and agency, from the macro level of the school, to the classroom level and lastly to the reading clubs (see Table 4.1).

	Structure	Culture	Agency
School	Timetables – allocating time and space to different classes, graded progressively, relational positions	Discourses - valuing education and necessity of hard work and good behaviour, inculcating certain practices	Agents with authority to maintain structures, visible in hierarchy
Classrooms	Organisation of seating, turn-taking in lessons, resources	Discourses regulating behaviour and subject content	Teachers have agency to teach: learners have agency to participate or not
Reading clubs	8 self-formed groups to discuss together; reading materials and journals	Discourses in response to books, using literary vocabulary	Learners have agency to read, to respond and to comment, or not

Table 4.1 Examples of structure, culture and agency at Bay High School

What is critical to any analysis of these is Archer’s question: “whose activities are responsible for what and when?” (1995: 141). Answering these will be the work of the succeeding chapters.

### 4.3.2 Morphogenesis

Morphogenesis is a three-stage cycle in which the interaction of the ‘parts’ (structure and culture) and the ‘people’ (agency) interact over time. As an explanatory model it offers a way to understand changes that may occur over time as sequential cycles of “structural conditioning/ social interaction/ structural elaboration – thus unravelling the dialectical interplay between structure and action” (Archer, 1982: 458). As my study took place over an eight-month period – with two breaks for exams and holidays – a morphogenetic approach can help in plotting the interplay of structure, culture and agency. As Archer’s diagram, mentioned in Chapter 2, illustrates,

structural conditioning at T<sub>1</sub> precedes socio-cultural interaction between T<sub>2</sub> and T<sub>3</sub>. At T<sub>4</sub> at the end of the study, the interplay between structure and agency could either result in morphostasis in which there has been no change, or morphogenesis, in which there has been change to “a system’s given form state or structure” (Archer, 1995: 166). In relation to my study, in ‘separating the parts from the body’, the T<sub>1</sub> involves recognising learners’ social and cultural conditioning that predated the intake of this grade 8 group, i.e. before engagement with the reading clubs began.

### **4.3.3 Reflexivity**

Within qualitative research, reflexivity has come more and more to the fore. Despite the dominance of big data and quantitative eminence, Lather (2013: 643) suggests an “ascendance in reflexive knowledge” as a laudable pattern in research. Pillow (2003) distinguishes between reflection, which involves looking back (as Dewey suggests), understanding what has happened in the past, and reflexivity which involves an ‘other’ and an awareness of self-scrutiny. Self-reflexivity is a means of establishing positional validity (Macbeth, 2001). This involves acknowledging the researcher’s role in the research process and recognising the personal interests and biases that might be at play (Pillow, 2003). While reflexivity might be considered part of a post-modern or feminist approach to research, Archer (2007) claims it is part of being human. A reflexive stance in research allows the researcher to establish positionality in relation to the research, thus becoming part of the inquiry (Pelias, 2011).

In this study reflexivity is used both as a way of looking back and as a means of understanding my position and actions in relation to the learners. In addition, it is used by the learners as a tool to understand their own positions and to consider the journey we have taken together in the reading clubs. For all participants, reflexivity allowed an approximation of the experience and thus does not claim to be complete or final. Thus there is an awareness of the limitations and representation - but the focus is still on “representing recognition” (Pillow, 2003: 184). In addition, reflexivity was an on-going activity both for me in responding to the learners’ responses and requests but also for the learners as they reflected on their readings and understandings of the reading club experience.

Archer offers a sociological understanding of reflexivity in terms of how it operates within the human experience. As such, she recognises the contribution of reflexivity to maintaining or disrupting social order. For example, in so called traditional societies, “the co-existence of cultural and structural morphostasis together generated a high and lasting degree of everyday ‘contextual continuity’” (Archer, 2010: 281) which resulted in repetition and habit - and which reflexivity (where it occurred) served to maintain. Through reflexivity and second-order monitoring we establish what we wish to be engaged in and from that our ‘ultimate concerns’ and commitments arise. If this case study developed as ‘an ultimate concern’ with the practice of reading and specifically, with literature, then it can be seen as a ‘project’ which Archer (2007c) characterises as a supremely human endeavour, as humans have “reflexive ability to design and redesign many of the projects they pursue” (Archer, 2007c: 7). Within the reading clubs, learners can also be understood to have ‘ultimate concerns’ and to pursue ‘projects’ to address them. Learners might, for example, have a concern to do well at school and, thus, in the context of the reading club exercise agency as a result of reflexivity to pursue this concern. A different kind of concern on the part of learners might result in the exercise of agency to avoid participating in reading club practices.

A critical realist understanding of reflexivity is dependent on artificially separating structure, culture and agency for analytical purposes. Reflexivity presumes that one has an awareness of personal ‘projects’ and their goals, while at the same time knowing the social circumstances that could influence the particular projects or concerns. These are then assessed through a deliberation process which “consists in people evaluating their situations in the light of their concerns and evaluating their projects in the light of their circumstances” (Archer, 2007c: 34). Archer warns that reflexivity is not possible if structure, culture and agency have been conflated as it requires a separation between subject and object, or a separation of the ‘parts’ from the ‘people’. So reflexivity can only follow when analytical dualism has been established. Reflexivity involves “subjects reflecting upon themselves in relation to their circumstances” (Ibid: 42) so they must be able to distinguish between themselves and their options in order to deliberate about possible trajectories resulting from the available alternatives. Inherent in globalizational trends is the need to adapt to ever-changing demands and to deliberate reflexively about so doing.

Archer warns that over-emphasising either individualisation or Bourdieu's (1990) 'habitus' are conflationary moves which squeeze out possibilities for reflexivity. With the prevalence of contextual discontinuity in this modern age, Archer suggests that even greater reflexivity is required.

When Archer maps reflexivity on to her morphogenetic approach, the centrality of time becomes clearer (see Figure 4.2 below). The 'parts' depend on agential interactions for their continuance and, through interplay with the 'people', structures are either maintained or modified over time. Habit and reflexivity both work in this interplay: this is because both can be considered as mediational processes of considering structures and possible or enacted agential moves in response to the structure (Archer, 2010). So at {Relation a} the social conditioning forces at play may be habitual or may allow for deliberation and choice. Archer (2010: 277) suggests that at {Relation a} people are either socially conditioned by powers or through reflexivity take up alternative positions: therefore {Relation b} represents whether they reproduced their circumstances, and themselves, or changed them. At  $T_4$  the cycle starts anew, though of course it is in reality on-going, with possibly new agents and structures, depending on whether there was morphostasis or morphogenesis.

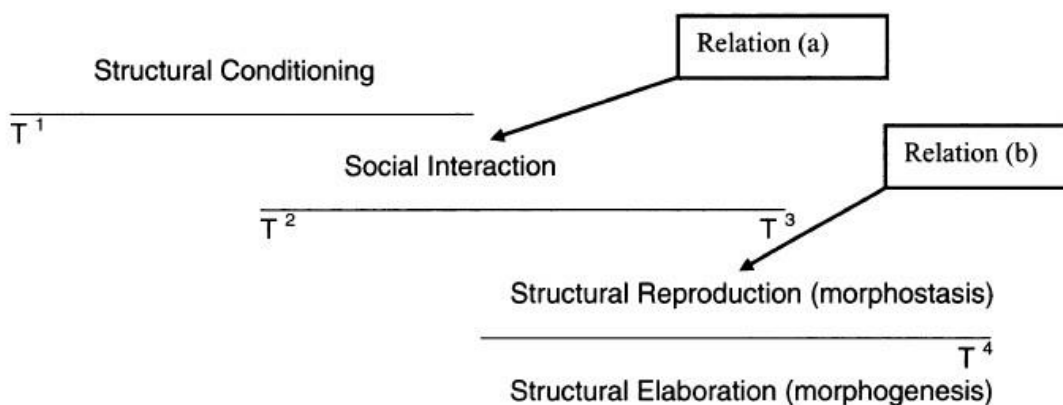


Figure 4.2 Archer's morphogenetic approach (2010: 275)

If education is mapped on to the morphogenetic model above, the relatively enduring schooling structure was in existence at  $T_1$  before learners entered the school. When they arrive, not only do they come from certain sociocultural conditioning, they are expected to fit into the existing structure of grades, linguistic choices, ways of behaving, dressing and addressing and in so doing contribute to maintaining this

structure. They are also expected to take up school-based literacies – which may or may not align with those they bring – which also structure their existence. This trend is reproduced when we zoom in to grade and classroom structures: structuring conditions serve to order (and in so doing, value) certain behaviour. In the same way certain (valued) literacy practices also structure learners' literacy engagements. At [Relation a] students interact with, and within, the schooling system. They need to engage with the structures so that by {Relation b} they have progressed successfully through the structures and acquired the specified competencies of the education system so that they can emerge 'transformed' with a school leaving certificate when they exit the secondary level. Their relative accomplishment in secondary educational structures determines their possible progression to tertiary structures and a new cycle. However, while school-based practices claim to be neutral, in fact they serve some learners better than others, particularly those from the middle-class, as Heath's (1983) study showed. Because of their structural and cultural conditioning, working-class learners may experience school literacies as alien. Meanwhile the secondary cycle continues with successive intakes of learners. While schooling structures have certain visible features, Archer reminds us that

[S]tructures themselves contain non-observable emergent causal powers whose combination (relations between relations) generates the further emergent properties (Archer, 1995:172).

So within the different schools and even within the same school, relations between varying agents result in the emergence of diverse properties and powers. Archer explains it thus:

Natural necessity only states that X cannot be what it is without certain constituents A, B, C, N' and the relations between them. But what is it about X which leads us to attach the concept of emergence to it rather than simply viewing X as the name given to the particular combination or permutation of A, B, C, N'? The crucial distinguishing property is that X itself, and itself being a relational property has the generative capacity to modify the powers of its constituents in fundamental ways and to exercise causal influences sui generis. This is the litmus test which differentiates between emergence on the one hand and aggregation and combination on the other (Archer, 1995: 174)

So secondary schools consist of certain constituents, for example staff, learners, curriculum, codes of conduct and learning phases, among others. Schools'

generative properties lie in the inter-relations between the constituents that are encouraged or prohibited within this entity. Within the particular example of BHS interrelations between constituents lead to the emergence of a new structure in the form of reading clubs in the grade 8 class. So, in to the macro morphogenetic cycle, reading clubs were introduced along with that particular structure and possible agential positions. I was aware that in introducing reading clubs I was introducing a specific literacy to the learners which I considered to be critical to their success at school. In one way this literacy could thus be seen to be empowering because acquisition could improve their chances of success in the school leaving examinations. However, it could also be seen to be constraining, because, if learners did not acquire it, then their success would be limited. Inherent in reading clubs was an 'appreciation of books' discourse, which may or may not have been part of learners' experiences. Some of the learners were hesitant and exercised their agency to resist and pursue projects of their own.

#### **4.3.4 Conceptualization of reading clubs**

Critical realism requires concepts to be explained (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). So in this study the notion of 'reading clubs' needs to be conceptualized both at the levels of the empirical and the actual - and also as an abstract concept as part of the processes necessary to move to the level of the real. Firstly, reading clubs operated as groupings of learners with particular characteristics. Each 'club' consisted of between four and six learners and was named by the group, as indicated in Figure 4.1 above. This name was then used to refer to the group and their activities in relation to the books and their reading. Clubs were recognised and visible in their spatial groupings and conversations. It was also an organizational category in the allocation and return of books and journals. So in Danermark *et al.*'s terms, they served to divide the reality, in this case of the classroom, "into different types of events and empirical characteristics" (2002: 122).

In critical realist terms, reading clubs can be conceptualised as a series of events at the level of the Actual during which learners shared their experiences of the same book or reflected on their reading in journal writing. Awareness of and observations about these experiences would be located at the level of the Empirical. The concept of 'reading club' needs to function in practice, provide deep insight and have strong

explanatory power (Danermark *et al.*, *ibid*). As an *entity* reading clubs consist of parts, in this case the learners who belonged to each reading club. In critical realist terms, reading clubs are also understood as a structure, at the level of the real, which possess causal powers termed 'structural emergent properties' (SEPs) (Sayer, 2000; Elder-Vass, 2010). Through the exercise of agency, the possibility arises of drawing on these SEPs to effect the emergence of different kinds of reading and experiences of reading which can be observed as 'events' at the level of the Actual and reported as experiences and observations at the level of the Empirical. So, in conceptualising reading clubs Danermark *et al.*'s (2002: 129) comment on the relationship between theorizing and empirical research as "a question of deduction following logical rules on the one hand, and of operationalization on the other" is useful as a distinction between the idea of a reading club and what that means, and what the practice of reading clubs entailed.

#### **4.3.5 Identity**

Archer (2002; 2010) links concepts of reflexivity, agency and identity. For example, Archer supports Elder-Vass's (2010) notion that involvement in "deliberate transformation" or a commitment to developing skills results from reflexively deliberating on priorities relating to one's personal identity (Archer, 2010). In this process of deliberate transformation the individual physically practises and hones her skills to improve, for example, at tennis. Through engaging in reflexive internal conversations people participate in a process that makes us "the particular active subjects that we are" (Archer, 2002: 17). For Archer, identity moves are an inter-play between personal and social positions, alternating in ascendancy as people experience the three orders of reality, i.e. natural, practical and social. As people make dry-runs informed by the practical and natural they try on different social positions, for example, all the time reflexively monitored by internal conversations. So identity work is a shuttling between different possibilities and positions - and assessing the investment required of each - as many can coexist and require different levels of commitment. From this perspective Archer and Gee suggest overlapping understandings of identity as fluid, contingently formed, shape-shifting and requiring investment. Dialogically the priorities and claims of contesting roles are weighed up and prioritised (Archer, 2002). While not reducing people and players to mere language, language use is a marker of identity moves – as Gee (2008) has

pointed out. Gee's use of big "D" discourse is useful because it recognises "ways of being" (*ibid.*: 157) which, together with language, can indicate identity. Reading clubs were sites where learners could engage in 'dry-runs' in formulating responses to the text. This shuttling between different positions was even more marked in journal writing as learners engaged in the 'discourse of the book'. So within the reading club process, learners had opportunities to be seen as readers, to carry books around and read in taxis or at home, to present their understandings of books to a public audience, to host a book display in the library, to engage in discussions about books and to reflect in journal writing about books. Thus they could be said to have taken up Discourses which involved reading and talking about books, to a greater or lesser extent, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

#### **4.4 Reading club data collection**

As the reading club programme developed, different kinds of data emerged. Within the context of the class, simultaneous discussion among eight reading groups provided many examples of emerging talk about books. Hence talking about books and providing a framework for book talk was ongoing. Journals were introduced to enable learners to prepare for, and to reflect on book discussions. Finally some learners were invited to share their final reflections about the reading club experience. These sets of data were generated by the learners who participated and shared throughout this experience. Together they provide a rich perspective, and act as a form of triangulation, defined by Stake (2005: 454) as "a process of using multiple perspectives to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation". Different forms of data generation also offered the participants alternative ways of enacting reading and understanding and exploring these options for themselves, agentially. As the reading clubs occurred outside the English syllabus being followed by the other grade 8 classes, encouraging engagement and motivation to read were ongoing. So Guthrie, Wigfield & You's (2012) analysis of how the instructional context facilitates engagement and motivation to read provides a useful guide to planning a reading intervention.

##### **4.4.1 Establishment of reading clubs**

Ms Loti, the grade 8 teacher, had arrived at the school in August of the previous year. I had been working with the grade 8s when she arrived and together we tried

certain support strategies for the remainder of the year with me taking groups of learners to the library to discuss books and supplement class instruction. We agreed on the establishment of reading clubs as an approach to reading for the following year. It was important that we had a collaborative approach as other studies attribute success to the support of the class teacher (Cliff Hodges, 2012; Guth & Pettengill, 2005; Tatum, 2006) and a lack of such support would prove limiting. In addition there were many reasons why teacher support and understanding was critical to promoting the club concept. Firstly, it legitimizes the practice as a mainstream activity both in the eyes of the school and the learners so it is not seen as a peripheral add-on. Secondly, it offered alternative book reading approaches to mainstream teachers: to understand the approach the teacher herself needed to be fully involved and committed. Thirdly, as I was an outsider and school visitor, it helped me to have an insider supporting me and informing me about changes to the school programme, new timetables, and other school activities. Reading clubs would be a site for a Bakhtinian dialogic experience of multi-voiced multilayered interactions (Langer 2001). They could also be a site for both talking and writing in a very personal way in response to literature, thereby shifting learners' literacy practices and views of themselves as literacy learners.

#### **4.4.1.1      *Reading club practices: structure and agency***

The concept of a *club* presumes membership and participation. So learners in these reading clubs participated in a community activity of reading. Drawing on Lave and Wenger's communities of practice, they were being apprenticed into particular reading practices and ways of talking about books (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Through ongoing interaction in reading club activity and regular support, learners could move from peripheral participation to a central position. Taking the idea of learning as a trajectory, Greeno and Gresalfi (2012: 171) suggest that learning, and in this case reading "is a process in which individuals participate more proficiently in practices that have structure". As learners are founding members of their clubs their roles are legitimate so they can operate in Lave & Wenger's terms as 'legitimate peripheral participants'.

Reading clubs were based on understandings of dialogue as Moore & Cunningham (2006: 137) suggest that "social experiences that operate through dialogue provide

especially rich conditions for agency”. As agency requires choices, this was built into the reading club structure in different ways. Initial forming of groups and choosing names were enactments of agency and encouraged learner commitment and engagement. Name choices were dialogically negotiated between group members and became a means of identification and solidarity. So, groups as a unit could request a book or post a response from the group. Learners self-identified as group members, as in “We’re the Tigers” and with titles they had read, as in “The Cheetahs have read *The Runaways*”. Within each group learners took up different positions as further enactments of agency: for example, Lilla in the Tigers asked everyone questions, while Jackie in the Contagious Kids summarized all the views with “we think...”. Further examples will be discussed in Chapter 6 on reading clubs, with a focus on group and individual agency over the period of the reading club experience.

Spatially, groups met together, either in the classroom or in the library and could be organised along group structure lines. Similarly, the structuring of learners into reading groups served to organise the distribution and collection of books. Within the reading clubs themselves, patterns of communication and ways of approaching book talk were established by modelling and practice. Through establishing the topics to be discussed the interactions could follow a regular frame, with the possibility of adding something personal or new. McMahon & Raphael (1997) suggest that learners need a framework for discussing literature and applying this framework needs monitoring and support in a variety of ways. As taking ownership of their literary responses was new to these learners, the framework, discussed in 4.4.1.3 below, needed reminding and reinforcing.

#### **4.4.1.2      *Reading club culture***

Reading club interactions were based on understandings of reading as engagement within a school context. There are subtle differences between engagement and motivation though some research uses them interchangeably. Engagement involves being deeply involved in reading from behavioural, affective and cognitive perspectives, whereas “[M]otivation is what energizes and directs behaviour” (Guthrie, Wigfield & You, 2012: 602). So the connection between them is that “[E]ngagement reflects motivated action” (*ibid*: 603). Within the class and within the reading clubs, I tried to establish a dialogic culture with engagement promoted

through the use of personal responses. Through social interaction learners could take up 'booktalk' encompassing a particular vocabulary (such as, character, setting, plot) and within the context of the club and do this many times. As learners appropriate the language of literature, they adapt their conversation to the new context. In this way learners adopt a new 'identity kit', in Gee's terms, as they begin to acquire the Discourse which encompass practices around books and reading. Reading clubs were primarily sites for Gee's (2000b) 'affinity' or A- type experiences as they were premised on learners sharing responses to books in their groups. Within the clubs learners were afforded a space to voice their inchoate responses as they engaged with the texts. Within clubs learners who had read the same books could discuss what appealed to them and choose what to respond to.

Keene & Zimmerman (2007) suggest that modelling and unpacking the targeted reading practices makes these more explicit for the learners. McMahon and Raphael's (1997) reading clubs established appropriate behaviour as well as appropriate talk about books by regularly recognising students' insightful comments as part of growing identities as readers. A model of reading club talk was introduced via a fishbowl book discussion where a group sat and discussed and the others watched. Modelling as a device to establish reading club structures, cultural interactions and agential possibilities will be explored further in Chapter 6 in the discussion on the reading clubs.

As mentioned, Cazden (2001) recognises that talk in class situations followed a particular pattern which she labels IRE, referring to *Initiation, Response, Evaluation*. This pattern reinforces the teacher's position as the authority and mediator of knowledge. However this pattern and positioning inhibits sincere responses to literature (Miller & Legge, 1999), limits real engagement (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2002) and discourages learning (Nystrand, 1997; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand and Gamoran, 2003). Through reading club talk, the pattern of teacher-fronted instruction following Cazden's IRE questioning was disrupted as the onus for talking shifted to the learners and their responses. Authentic conversations where teachers and learners interact to clarify understandings is the essence of *real* dialogic interaction according to Applebee, *et al.* (2003). They also suggest that "comprehension of difficult texts can be significantly enhanced by replacing traditional I-R-E patterns of

instruction with discussion-based activities” (Ibid: 693). These could include learners making predictions or links to other texts, clarifying understanding or posing questions, or mustering evidence to support a claim or understanding.

Recording reading club interactions and ‘booktalk’ became a weekly event both in the class and in the library. To encourage the learners to participate, they were given the recorder and engaged in their discussion independently, in order to remove any influence my presence might have. Table 4.2 below shows titles discussed by the various groups as well as the length of each group’s discussion. Times in brackets indicate that the learners recorded a further discussion on the same title. In the last column I have indicated the recordings of informal conversations that took place in the library. All the recordings were listened to many times prior to transcription, as recommended by Maxwell (2013), to see how learners were engaging in the clubs and how they made sense of their readings. In addition, repeated, concentrated listening to the spoken voice surfaced various *dispositions* to reading. Based on the literacy practices that learners drew on in their ‘booktalk’, I then chose examples of early reading club discussions to analyse in depth. In this way I tried to cover the range of group discussions, as well as changes in their discourse. The analysis of the discussions is presented as a series of *vignettes* in Chapter 6. I have also included an analysis of the first recording in the library during break time as the first of these vignettes.

Reading club	5 Conceited Kids	Cheetahs	Contagious Kids	Cool Cats	Pythons	Supreme Team	Tigers	Youth Representatives	Library
Recording 1	July: <i>My father and I</i> 3:14	Aug: <i>Don't tell me what to do</i> 4:54, (5:00)	Aug: <i>David Copperfield</i> 3:48, (1:09)	May: <i>The boy who was afraid</i> 4.22	Aug: <i>Rainman</i> 4:22	Aug: <i>David Copperfield</i> 4:23	May: <i>Don't tell me what to do</i> 4:31	Aug: <i>Rainman</i> 3:26	May: 16:36
Recording 2	Aug: <i>Don't tell me what to do</i> 3:09, (7:17), (7:48)	Sept: <i>Seedfolks</i> 25:00	Sept: <i>The boy who was afraid</i> 2:00, (1:41)	July: <i>Seedfolks</i> 9:23, (6:21)	Sept: <i>Seedfolks</i> 4.59, (3.55), (3.57)	Oct: <i>Seedfolks</i> 0:39, (2:45)	July: <i>Mpho's search</i> 4:05	Sept: <i>Cry the Beloved Country</i> 4:47	July: 3:07
Recording 3	Sept: <i>Seedfolks</i> 6:45, (4:23)	Oct: <i>David Copperfield</i> 13:45, (13:21)	Sept: <i>Rainman</i> 3:40	Sept: <i>Don't tell me what to do</i> 20:53	Oct: <i>Cry the Beloved Country</i> 1:05, (16:37)	N/A	Aug: <i>Seedfolks</i> 8:15	Oct: <i>Daddy Long Legs</i> 6:01	Aug 1: 9:12 Aug 2: 16:02
Recording 4	N/A	N/A	Oct: <i>Daddy Long Legs</i> <sup>10</sup> 6:01	Oct: <i>Tomorrow when the war began</i> 5:00,	N/A	N/A	Aug: <i>Rainman</i> 5:00, (4:26)	N/A	Sept 1: 15:43 Sept 2: 2:46
Recording 5	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Sept: <i>4 weddings and a funeral</i> 5:04	N/A	Nov: 14:33
Total titles	3	3	3/4	4	3	2	5	3	
<b>Total recording time</b>	<b>32:36</b>	<b>62:00</b>	<b>17:79</b>	<b>45:59</b>	<b>33.75</b>	<b>7:07</b>	<b>31:21</b>	<b>14:14</b>	<b>76.79</b>
									<b>320.7</b>

Table 4.2 Reading Club and Library Recordings (showing month, title & length of recording)

<sup>10</sup> Two girls from the Conceited Kids joined the Youth Representatives in reading *Daddy Long Legs*. The two boys joined the one from the 5 Contagious Kids to read *Shane*.

#### 4.4.2 Introduction of journals

Journals were introduced as a reflective space for learners to record their thinking. As reading and writing inform each other (Janks, 2011) introducing a written component to a reading club encouraged learners to become text participants (Freebody & Luke, 1990). According to Yin (2009), documents are useful to corroborate and augment other forms of data. However, that was not the only purpose of journal writing in reading clubs. While the journal reflections served to capture what had been said in discussions, they also became another form of reflection entirely. Managing eight reading groups with forty learners, including facilitating and modelling discussions, monitoring the weekly exchange of books, supporting and recording group sessions, challenging learners to ask probing questions or extend their ideas, was challenging. For learners to be able to participate more fully in the reading club discussion they were asked to record their thinking before meeting and also their subsequent reflections. So journals provided for agential moves as writers engaged in internal dialogues to coordinate “different internal voices” and to answer questions that the ‘self poses to itself’ (Moore & Cunningham, 2006: 136).

For learners who are on the margins of the educational system with limited cultural and social capital to support their educational endeavours, education often serves to replicate hierarchies of inequality (Gee, 2008; Fleisch, 2009). If education is to provide opportunities to disrupt this tendency, then learners need explicit instruction in the dominant knowledge systems. Delpit (1995) powerfully showed how black children were excluded through alienating pedagogical practices. Similarly Fecho, Davis and Moore (2006: 189) grapple with providing access to “mainstream power codes” for their African American students without forsaking their culture and dialect. They specifically refer to Gordon’s advocacy for writing in that “Blacks ... need to write about and make sense of their lives, to find purpose beyond reality” (Ibid: 190). They value Gordon’s espousal of writing as “[T]o write about one’s life is to speak for one’s humanity and perspective” (Fecho, Davis and Moore, 2006: 190). Writing, like reading, is often used as a gatekeeping device in the schooling system with less writing practice happening at disadvantaged schools and with a focus on grammar rather than on authentic responses (Hendricks, 2008). For school learners to

become practiced in writing, they need many opportunities to engage in the kind of writing that requires them to extend their ideas in a discussion. Through the process of writing, ideas can be structured and clarified as “[T]he act of writing itself becomes a way of being and knowing” (Foley, 2002: 475). Janks (2011) suggests that children need to see the value as well as enjoyment of literacy activities which are seen as *work* linked to the world of school. Within this study, writing focused on a particular literacy practice of responding to novels while using terminology from the DoE Curriculum, i.e. drawing on the ‘discourse of the book’, as a prompt or frame.

#### **4.4.2.1 Journal writing structures**

Journal writing does not fall neatly into categories regarded as key for school literacy (Martin, 1985; Hendricks, 2008). As such it is more difficult to analyse its form, provide a scaffold for its writing or use as a model to emulate. Hendricks’ study of grade 7 writing indicates that extended writing occurs infrequently in language classrooms and the writing that is practised is restricted to certain types. Independent writing tended to focus on “self-descriptive, autobiographical writing” (Hendricks, 2008: 35) across the three official languages in the schools in her study. She points out that quality and quantity are reciprocal in developing writing as

[T]ogether with regular opportunities to write individually and independently, to develop the quality of their writing, learners also need to receive constructive feedback about the structure and coherence of their texts” (*ibid.*: 35).

Similarly, observations of classroom literacy practices across sample classes in the United States noted very little writing occurring in the classes observed, despite the provision of a co-teacher to provide specialised instruction and additional literacy support for those with learning challenges (Zigmond, 2006).

The previous chapter highlighted the affordances of journal writing for students’ cognitive development (Hutchings, 1998), the foregrounding of learners’ responses and opportunities to engage dialogically with the teacher (Fisher & Frey, 2012) as well as acquiring agency (Brockback and McGill, 1998). Writing in journals can go some way to address these shortcomings as learners have multiple opportunities to write, including especially, extended texts. As Hendricks noted in her class study, prompts provide a frame or template for the learners’ writing. So the ‘discourse of the

book' which included the concepts of character, plot and setting, among others, provided learners with a starting point for their comments. While there was a literary innocence, there was also a strong drive for the 'correct' answer, for indications of errors in grammar and spelling and for a final assessment mark or grade. In other words learners' approaches to journal writing were informed by experiences of assessment structures, marks and parental reports. Offering alternative structures of personal ongoing dialogues without red-pen corrections, or marks meant a mind-shift for learners who had been drilled in thinking that written work should be marked and should be 'for marks'. Changing writing structures will be discussed further in chapter 7 on journal writing.

#### **4.4.2.2      *Journal writing practices***

According to Townsend and Pace (2005), knowing that one will have a chance to participate may lead to more thoughtful reflections of homework reading assignments. So as mentioned earlier, learners were encouraged to use some writing prompts in thinking about their reading so that they would be ready to share responses in the reading club. Also, insights arise while reading so learners were encouraged to capture these and hold on to them in writing. In order to practice written literary responses, learners were encouraged to journal about each book they read. Particular writing practices were introduced and scaffolded, like predicting from the title and cover of the novel, monitoring their predictions as they read, as well as commenting on issues that were relevant to the particular novel. These could include a comment on characters, setting, plot and theme. Journals were collected and responded to regularly with a focus on supporting and affirming what was written. A supportive environment has been recognised as critical in encouraging and motivating literacy activities, as has teacher validation and positive interpersonal relations (Guthrie Wigfield & You, 2012). In fact recognising these issues, as well as providing for learner autonomy and interesting texts (*ibid*) were central to journal writing responses and reading club practices. In this way through this particular literacy practice, learners can come to see the value in their own responses.

A page count as an indicator of how much learners used their journals is indicated in Table 4.3 below. This just speaks to the volume of writing. The quality and development of writing will be discussed in a series of vignettes in Chapter 7.

Journals were collected and responded to every two weeks to try to maintain a conversation, monitor their writing and encourage their thinking about books.

<b>Journal writing summary per reading club</b>						
Club	No of journals	Females & pages	Total pages	Males & pages	Total pages	
5 Conceited Kids	3	2 (12) (22)	34	1 (14)	14	48
Cheetahs	4	4 (21) (23)(24) (32)	100			100
Contagious Kids	2	2 (25) (36)	61			61
Cool Cats	5	3 (28) (30) (33)	91	2(18) (23)	41	132
Pythons	4	2 (15) (29)	44	2 (20) (20)	40	84
Supreme Team	5	3 (22) (24) (32)	78	2 (10) (21)	31	109
Tigers	5	3 (18) (24) (47)	89	2 (8) (18)	26	115
Youth Representatives	4	3 (14) (22) (32)	68	1 (17)	17	85
<b>Totals</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>565</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>734</b>

Table 4.3 Journal pages written per reading club

#### 4.4.3 Library use

Traditionally and historically libraries and library use have been structured so as to regulate and control the borrowing of material, often books, and thus to regulate behaviour related to reading. Opening up the library was not the purpose of this study. Instead I saw the library as an available alternative to the classrooms. Using the library meant I had a space in the school and teachers remained as rightful owners of their classroom space and activities. It had always been a plan for the school to reopen the library and, to this end, I had been told before my first visit that it had recently been repainted. That the library was not central to reading and learning at the school was clear from the fact that I did not see the library for the first few years that I helped at the school. It was only when my classroom literacy

activities were being regularly interrupted by the class teacher that I enquired about the whereabouts of the library.

Prior to this study I had tried to run reading groups in the library during break times. The class teacher undertook to encourage learners to attend but the reading groups were not connected to classroom practices in any way or to the language teacher. As a result attendance was sporadic and I was often unaware of school functions during breaks, changes to the timetable or alternative school arrangements that prevented my opening the library for reading groups. A compromise between classroom and class teacher involvement (and a new teacher), and the use of the library space resulted in the introduction, in 2011, of the reading clubs that are the focus of this study.

#### **4.4.4 Final discussions**

Interviews and focus groups are firmly established as qualitative data collection methods. As interviews occurred towards the end of the reading club process they served as additional insights into the process and added to our joint understanding of what the clubs had meant to the learners. By this stage of the year the learners knew me well and I invited some to share with me either individually, or in pairs, their thoughts on the process.

While interviews are sometimes regarded as “the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers” (Fontana & Frey, 2005: 696), these interviews were more oriented towards understanding experiences. So while there was an interchange of questions and answers, it was more empathetically framed and informed by a “methodology of friendship” (Kong, 2002: cited in Fontana & Frey, 2005: 694). Hence the interviews were not designed to gather facts but rather “to obtain a rich experiential account of an event or episode” (Ibid: 698), from which, in critical realist terms, I could move to an excavation of the level of the Real. As interviews constituted the culminating reading club activity, I did not have to overcome some of the challenges faced when approaching interviewing as outlined by Fontana and Frey, such as ‘accessing the setting’, ‘understanding the language and culture’ or deciding how to present myself’. Instead through ongoing collaboration we had built up some trust and rapport, though I was still viewed as a

pseudo-teacher figure. As I had worked together with the learners, heard their discussions and read their journals, each interview or conversation could be centred on their particular responses or experiences. So while the interviews all included some common questions, and were semi-structured, they were also quite personalized. Thus interviews were informed by Gubrium & Holstein's (2005) view of interviews as contextually based mutually accomplished stories that are reached through collaboration between the researcher and the participants (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The final interviews also gave me a new lens on the learners' experiences of the reading clubs and these will be discussed in the data-driven chapters of this thesis.

#### **4.5 Conclusions**

Lather (2013: 642) suggests that method is always political and that we need to consider how it can be "community based, community sustaining and community serving in ways that might help alter the structure of institutions in more expansive democratizing ways". The first step is for the community to have a presence and its voices to be heard which is what this research design attempts to do in a small way. With the focus on reading clubs–interactions over a period of eight months, supported by journal reflections and interviews, learners' voices and experiences take centre stage, while standardized national and international reading scores provide a backdrop.

Using a critical realist stance allows the research to move from the Empirical and Actual to an understanding of the causal mechanisms at the level of the Real. The structural and cultural properties operating at a  $T_1$  position at the beginning of the study established a starting point for investigating the interplay between the reading clubs and school structures over time. At a class level the interplay between class structures and pedagogical practices of, for example, whole class teaching, and the emergent powers of the reading clubs and the individual learners, will be examined.

## CHAPTER 5

### STRUCTURE, CULTURE AND AGENCY AT T<sub>1</sub>

*“... many students need.. classrooms as places to practice, explore, and understand uses of language that mark communication norms within institutions [...] They need places of sustained talk with adults they can trust.”*

(Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways with Words*, 1996 Epilogue: 375)

#### 5.1 Introduction

At the school, by the end of the study, the reading club programme participants had been involved in four school events, contributed to new titles for grade 8 reading clubs, and had had input into choices for the library. The reading clubs themselves had produced twenty-four recordings of discussions on different titles, totalling 228 minutes; many unrecorded discussions; 734 pages of journal discussions; four feedback slips per learner and recorded reflective conversations with 18 learners usually in pairs. This constitutes the data of the study. In accordance with the theoretical chapters at the beginning of this thesis, I have used Archer's morphogenetic cycle (1995; 2000) as a guiding framework. The morphogenetic framework and the Archerian (1995; 2000) concept of analytical dualism allow for the separation of structure, culture and agency to better understand their interplay and also the resultant morphogenesis (change) or morphostasis (reproduction). Archer's framework recognises the importance of the constituents of the 'parts' (structure and culture) and the 'people' (agency) and avoids conflationary tendencies. As a complex process, morphogenesis includes the interplay that produces change[s] in a system's given form, structure or state, ending in structural elaboration (Archer, 1982). Considerations of structure and agency in educational research supplement its explanatory possibilities (Ashwin, 2009). In order to track morphogenesis or analyse morphostasis, it is important to explore the structural and cultural conditioning in place prior to any reading club intervention. So in this chapter I will examine the elements of structure, culture and agency at T<sub>1</sub>, i.e. at the outset of the study.

Archer's morphogenetic cycle takes Time 1, or  $T_1$  as the starting point of any analysis of structure, culture and agency. This establishes the way the 'people' have been conditioned by the 'parts', in this case structure and culture, in order to understand how their agency is constrained or enabled. An ontological feature of a critical realist approach is the recognition of underlying mechanisms at the level of the real. As already indicated in Chapter 2 of this thesis, separating structure and agency is an analytical step towards surfacing the structural and agential emergent properties of the objects of study. Structural and agential emergent properties are not observable at the empirical level and as such are underlying at the level of the real which can be described as a

generative network of many simultaneous and mutually reinforcing or counterbalancing mechanisms, whose operation can thus not always be seen empirically (Gijssels & Leuven, 2003: 5).

## **5.2 Structure at $T_1$**

Archer reminds us that at any time structure is the result of "prior social relations conditioned by an antecedent structural context" (Archer, 1985: 165). What this means is that at  $T_1$  we always work with structural conditioning resulting from earlier social interactions, so the education system, as one of the structures being examined, developed prior to the study and therefore both pre and post-dates this study. Structures could consist of, among other things, formal forms of organisation of society or patterns of institutions in which people interact according to their relations within the institution (Archer 1998). So structures set up relational working connections. What this means for *structure* is that it constitutes an organised societal framework, as well as the regulated interactions and relative positions with the framework. Educational structures also position people into relational categories which serve to condition behaviour and interactions between parties.

In considering the structures at play in this study, I begin with national structures and then narrow the gaze to educational structures and then structures at Bay High School in particular. In this way the study will start with the outer layer of the onion, so to speak, and peel away various layers in order to examining structural conditioning.

### **5.2.1 National structures**

Like many democracies South Africa is an unequally resourced society. Working-class communities are constrained at the level of the Real by limited access to finances. Unlike many other countries, the apartheid system used legislation to structure society so that black people were conditioned to take up working class roles. The structures of apartheid conditioned schools and educational frameworks to maintain this system. During the anti-apartheid movement people exercised agency to challenge these structures and, although the legislation has been repealed, some of the social conditioning endures.

#### **5.2.1.1 Political structures**

National structures that conditioned the learners' lived experience of reading and literacy include the apartheid ideology of government. As a government policy, it acted as a structure "governing the reproduction and transformation of social activities" (Bhaskar, 1989: 9). This was effected through various pieces of legislation. As is well known and recognised, apartheid separated people along colour lines based on the Population Registration Act, 1950, and promulgated different spaces and resources for the four major racial groups in that system. This system legislated where people could live (Group Areas Act), which schools they could attend (Bantu Education Act, 1953 and others), as well as which libraries or swimming pools they could use (Reservation of Separate Amenities Act, 1953). Thus, people's lives were structured by apartheid legislation which effectively anchored communities in demarcated geographical areas. Although this apartheid legislation has been repealed, apartheid laws still impact on the lived experience of families who continue to live in the familiar communities established under the old regime. The *de facto* geographical separation is in line with Archer's premise that historical structures continue to impact on today's communities.

#### **5.2.1.2 School structures**

Bay High School, located in a working class, 'Coloured' community in Port Elizabeth, is subject to national and provincial educational policies which structure curriculum, school administration and finances. As an urban school with brick buildings, running water and electricity it was designated at quintile 4 in terms of funding. The quintile

system, based on national poverty tables, was designed to fund schools according to their relative poverty status with the view that wealthier communities would be better resourced to raise funds and would thus require less government support (Hall & Giese, 2008/2009). Schools at quintiles 1 and 2 were designated as 'no-fee paying schools' and received additional funding to compensate for the lack of school funds (DoE). In 2013, no-fee-paying status was extended to quintile 3 schools with a similar budgetary recompense. In 2011 the school fees at BHS were R900 per learner per year, while similar sized model C schools<sup>11</sup>, all at quintile 5, charged R13000 to R15000 per learner per year. Of the 900 learners in 2011, 29.3% paid the full amount for the year, while 51% made a partial payment of an amount once or twice a year and 19.6% paid nothing. The number in the latter category has increased in the past two years (personal communication with school principal, 2013). In addition the school holds four fund-raising activities per year to supplement its income.

Internal and external structures serve to regulate learners' schooling. Within school, learners' lives are organised by their timetables which prescribe where each class must be at any given time. There are no options besides language choices for grade 8 learners. All learners in grade 8 must take all subjects, together with a home language and first additional language. Assemblies are held in an open quadrangle as there is no school hall. They are thus subject to weather conditions. Weather also affects school attendance. Not only do fewer learners attend if there is heavy rain but sometimes, if many learners have got wet on the way to school, school is cancelled and all learners are sent home to get dry clothes so as to avoid their having to sit in damp clothes all day at school. Other events that affect school attendance include previous public holidays. For example, Ascension Thursday which was a public holiday before 1994, was repealed by the Public Holidays Act of 1994, but significant numbers of staff and learners do not attend school on that day. Another example is Guy Fawkes Day on 5 November, which was never a public holiday in South Africa but is celebrated in the community to the extent that attendance is affected, schooling is disrupted and visitors, like me, are advised not to visit on that day. Attempts at structuring are thereby thwarted by agential support for historical

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<sup>11</sup> Model C schools are former 'white' schools which accumulated structural and cultural advantages during the apartheid era.

structures. So, timetables regulate 'normal' schooling days and allocate time and space to different learning areas with learners moving around the school to different teachers' classrooms. During end of year exams this pattern changes as classes are allocated a test venue and teachers move, thus reducing noise and traffic around the school.

Classrooms are organised according to the teacher's preferences with learners' heavy wooden desks placed in rows facing the front. Desks might be pushed together to encourage pair work and increase aisle space. With between forty and forty-two learners per grade 8 class, classrooms are quite crowded with little central space available. All classrooms have at least one wall that has a blackboard; however some of these have graffiti or are broken so not all are useable. Another wall, usually at the back, has pin-boards for learner projects, class posters or content information. Many have tippexed messages or are not used. There are no pin-boards or notice boards in the corridors except near the entrance for school visitors: learners rarely use this entrance. Messages are communicated through announcements at assembly or delivered over the class intercom system.

So we see an intersection of past and current political and educational structures at Bay High School. Historically the school and community were conditioned to take-up a racially segregated working-class position. This meant limited resources were provided: however even in the apartheid era there was provision for a stocked school library with a tenured librarian. As the political structures changed and the racial impetus was removed, the school kept its working class conditioning. Ironically, in the era of democracy, financial structures became more restrictive resulting in the closing of the school library and the loss of the librarian's post. As a result the school library remained locked and unutilized for a number of years. Lack of finance, as a structure at the level of the real, had therefore limited access to other structures, like the school library. The closing of the school library for many years entrenched the conditioning of the learners of that period as working class members with limited need for extensive reading or research. If we recognize that working-class learners will also have less educational and reading material in the home, we can see how learners are conditioned with less access to resources, and to narrower work and life opportunities. While racial legislation was removed, financial structures remained,

and were even exacerbated, which served to constrain the educational engagement. It would seem that in denying funding for these schools' libraries, the message was that these learners do not need access to books and whatever else might derive from reading, such as becoming more practiced and critical readers. The interplay between lack of access to books and libraries in the new educational structure positions children as being unable to read, leading to the nascent discourse of the poor reader. What this does is place the responsibility on the learners and not on the educational, political and financial structures into which children are born.

### **5.2.1.3      *Educational structures***

Accompanying the political separation of people under apartheid was the separation of educational systems into four departments of education along racial lines. Post apartheid, these were replaced by a national department to provide an over-arching coherent policy and philosophy, and nine provincial departments (Mouton, Louw & Strydom, 2012). Within provincial educational departments, provision was made for nine provincial ministers of education, known as Members of the Executive council or MECs, as well as directors general. In the Eastern Cape there are fourteen Chief Directors, twenty-seven central directors and twenty-three district directors. Within the Port Elizabeth district there are 393 public schools, i.e. government-run schools, which include primary and secondary schools (<http://www.ecdoe.gov.za/ecdoe/>).

National education policy prescribes the curriculum for schools. At the time of the study the Revised National Curriculum (RNCS) which specified the skills and competencies for home language classes was in place for grade 8 learners. This included learning outcomes and assessment standards for the following areas: listening; speaking; reading and viewing; writing and thinking - and reasoning. The following are the learning outcomes for grade 8 home languages that were specified at the time of the study:

#### Outcomes

1. Listening: The learner is able to listen for information and enjoyment, and respond appropriately in a wide range of situations.
2. Speaking: The learner is able to communicate confidently and effectively in a spoken language in a wide range of situations.
3. Reading and Viewing: The learner is able to read and view for information and enjoyment, and respond critically to the aesthetic, cultural and emotional values in texts.
4. Writing: The learner is able to write different kinds of factual and imaginative texts for a wide range of purposes.
5. Thinking and reasoning: The learner is able to use language to think and reason, and access, process and use information for learning.
6. Language Structure and Use: The learner knows and is able to use the sounds, words and the grammar of a language to create and interpret texts.

Listening and speaking; reading and viewing; writing; thinking and reasoning; and the knowledge of sounds, words and grammar, although presented as separate outcomes, should be integrated in teaching and assessment.

(DoE, nd: 20-21)

The division of language learning into these areas suggests a skills-based approach with a focus on the outcome of each area. In presenting these outcomes as neutral and universal it hides the social context in which language learning occurs and the diversities that exist in the South African landscape. As such it would seem therefore, to fall into a more autonomous understanding of literacy education where “the social conditions and cultural interpretations of literacy” (Street, 2005: 417) are ignored. Policy makers have the challenge of making policy documents clear and accessible to the educators who must use them and of producing curricula that reflect the richness and complexities of practices in people’s lives, rather than reducing literacy to “a few simple and mechanistic skills” (Street, 2005: 420). In this simplification it presumes a shared understanding of what *responding critically to texts* might involve or how *communicating confidently and effectively* might be demonstrated. If, as Gee (1990) and Heath (1983) found, there are significantly different orientations towards school practices of reading and speaking within small

English-speaking communities, we can also expect marked differences in orientations towards speaking and reading among South African learners. Simplification might make the policy documents more accessible, but in the process, middle-class notions of effective reading and speaking are normalized and become more entrenched as spaces are not left open for variations in practices.

### **5.2.2 Information and communication technologies**

Information and Communication Technologies, or ICTs, are a structure that learners can use to effect new reading practices, like reading from a computer screen or a mobile phone. Some schools have the wherewithal to provide these resources and often schools that are well-resourced with ICTs cater for learners whose homes too are well-resourced. Cellphones of different sorts are more likely to be in the homes of Bay High School learners than more expensive ICTs like computers.

Internationally, research in literacy now has a strong focus on multiliteracies and multimodalities in line with new literacy studies (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Street, 1984; Gee, 2007). These multiliteracies include digital literacies where, as well as cell phone messaging, students increasingly read and write academic texts, not just on computers but on hand-held devices like iPads and smartphones. International research focuses more and more on digital literacies and this trend has also been recognised in the South African context (Deumert, 2011). According to Janks (2013) mobile literacy is already an established literacy practice in poor communities in South Africa. As such it is a space for informal un-policed communication. People adapt their language of choice to their message and audience and in so doing, they read and write for meaning. So cellphones offer safe spaces for meaningful reading and writing. Despite this, schools do not encourage the use of cellphones as a reading and writing tool; neither do provincial or national educational boards. Indeed few learners or teachers would regard cellphones as serious literacy tools. Instead in the South African context, recognition of digital literacies is evident in the expansion of mobi-books on the Mxit service provider. The Harmony High series and other titles are available as mobile books from the Fundza mobi site to encourage learners to read books on their cell phones. This presumes availability of digital resources and, while these are becoming more widespread, they are unevenly spread and are used differently by different socio-economic groups.

So, internationally, there is a strong trend towards recognising the digital literacy practices among youth (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Campbell & Parr, 2013) and this is supported by many school programmes (Curwood & Cowell, 2011; Ehret & Hollet 2013). In contrast, in South Africa digital literacy practices are not sanctioned or encouraged in schools. In fact the possibility for alternative spelling and 'sms-talk', so popular among South African teens, is regarded as undermining the educational standards that schools work so hard to maintain. So affordable cellphone literacy practices are actively discouraged, while the use of computers and the internet are encouraged, particularly in well-resourced schools, as a means of supporting school-sanctioned, or traditional literacy.

Learners with limited access to ICTs at home are likely to attend less resourced schools with few if any computers and with inadequate internet connectivity. The extension of the digital divide in homes and schools serves to marginalize learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Although computers, tablets, iPhones and internet may be available, these are spread thinly and access may be restricted. The most ubiquitous media would probably be television and radio which are not really regarded as a means towards digital literacy due to the limited print and one-way channel of communication.

### **5.2.3 How structures condition learners**

All of these existing conditions serve to regulate the school and community experience of grade 8 learners at BHS. Historical political legislation, now defunct, still orders their lives in the spaces they must inhabit and traverse in order to obtain an effective, optimal educational experience (Fataar, 2010). The dependence on unregulated or rudimentary public transport impacts on learners' school attendance, participation in extra-mural activities, access to libraries and formation of friendship groups. Limited home resources coupled with an inherited under-resourced school, tends to keep learners in a working-class setting despite aspirations and belief in education as an enabling gateway. In truth many of the structural mechanisms impacting on these young learners' lives serve to keep them within familiar community environments, as Willis (1977) found with working class youth in the UK. Education which promises to open doors of opportunity, instead works within historical structures of inequality to maintain existing differences and inequities.

### **5.3 Culture at T<sub>1</sub>**

Culture includes attitudes, beliefs and values and the language patterns that carry these. In critical realist studies, discourses are understood to function as mechanisms at the level of the Real. So, when considering a reading culture, we need to examine what is said about reading at national levels. Public commentary can indicate attitudes as to how reading is valued; understandings of reading and literacy practices and also the relevance of reading in education.

#### **5.3.1 The discourse of the ‘poor reader’**

Media discourse includes alarmist reports about South African children’s poor reading, maths and literacy abilities as measured on the international reading test, PIRLS and the local ANAs. Low measurements of literacy on these tests are reported in national and local newspapers and are used to indicate the poor level of schooling and, in particular, inferior literacy education. While it is useful to have a comparison with levels of literacy in other countries - and PIRLS offers a detailed commentary of the 2006 and 2011 results - it must be noted that conditions in South Africa are particularly challenging. One challenge relates to the varieties of languages used in schools and homes. Linguistic variation is particularly significant as many children have a range of languages to draw on which may or may not be recognised or taught at schools. What PIRLS cannot do is allow the learner to choose the language in which to write the test. Although PIRLS tries to test learners’ literacy levels in their language of learning and teaching, or LoLT, this may not be the language in which learners have developed reading and writing skills. Another challenge connected to languages relates to the regional variations in the African languages, as well as the practice of mixing languages that is more common in urban settings: hence it is difficult to pinpoint, for some learners, what language is dominant for learning and literacy (Howie & Van Staden, 2008).

Another facet of discourse about literacy is its alleged enabling effect. Although school-based literacy practices do allow learners to access particular, powerful forms of knowledge, it is not literacy *per se* which empowers learners but rather particular literacies. School-based literacy practices provide access to powerful knowledge (Wheelahan 201) but for some learners it is more difficult to access these practices than for others.

### 5.3.2 The discourse of 'poor reading teaching'

Various guiding documents in relation to policy and practice have been produced by the National Education Department and more recently by the Department of Basic Education or DoE. Within education documents, the *National Reading Strategy* and *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades*, both produced in 2008, were evidence of a concern with addressing shortcomings in the teaching of reading. Both recommend a mastery of basic skills, such as phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension as the necessary bedrock for improving reading performance. Both documents stress the need for developing comprehension and for making meaning from texts and the need to focus on the learners' responses. In fact the suggested methodology encourages teachers to draw on learners' personal appreciation and understanding of texts. This approach affirms learners' understandings drawn from the intersection of the text and their knowledge of the world. In turn learners' own interpretations support their growing perception of themselves as readers whose views are valid and valuable. These attempts to encourage meaningful responses are in line with both Rosenblatt's (1983) reader response theory which recognises the primacy of the personal response, and also Street's (1984) ideological model.

The publication of two documents by the Education department in 2008 suggests a concerted effort at that point to address reading challenges. This may have been in response to the 2007 publication of the *PIRLS 2006 International Report* in which South Africa's grade 4 and 5 learners fared so poorly in the languages in which they had been taught for four years. The spotlight on reading for enjoyment and reading for information revealed the limited range of reading achievement in South African schools, as well as the gaps in reading skills. If at grades 4 and 5 South African learners were the weakest in the world, how would this be corrected in succeeding grades and for successive cohorts of learners? Hence *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* suggested classroom practices for grades R to 6 so that the needs of poorly performing learners, tested by PIRLS in 2006, could still be addressed.

Both DoE publications are based on certain assumptions. The first of these is the assumption that all teachers are familiar with the five components of reading as well as different reading strategies. The documents therefore serve to remind them of

these, and of the need to teach all elements and also to plan and practice different reading strategies with learners. An example is given of strategies used by the 'skilful reader' who makes meaning while reading and is active during pre, during and post-reading stages. Another assumption is the availability of reading material: in other words that structurally there is a distribution of resources at teachers' disposal to allow them to act on the advice of the handbooks. Teachers are exhorted to "Have as many reading materials as possible in the classroom" (DoE, 2008a: 17) and to use textbooks from other learning areas as a resource to develop fluency. A goal of teaching reading is independent reading which is premised on learners choosing their own books from a reading corner, 100 storybooks, or the library (DoE, 2008a: 27) which again assumes the availability in the class of suitable, linguistically appropriate books. In order to meet the needs of different learners, teachers are encouraged to use group work so that groups can practice different skills with varying texts and extend their understanding with some imaginative activities during 'Reading and writing focus time'.

The DoE is to be commended for the many creative ideas for developing reading and writing included in these documents but I wonder to what extent teachers rise to the challenge of organising many parallel activities to allow learners choice and space to engage creatively with reading and writing. Besides an assumption that teachers are all very organised, it presumes an assortment of materials, including stationery, fabric, coloured paper, play-dough, stored in shoeboxes or ice-cream tubs at the disposal of the learners. It also presumes that homes support school literacy practices and that these are aligned with working class homes. If teachers are more used to whole class teaching and chanting together, the change to group reading activities might involve a change in pedagogic habitus (Gennrich & Janks, 2013), which does not happen easily.

If these documents are based on the assumption that teachers need help and guidance, then the learners, as subjects of the proposed teaching interventions, must be in even more need of help. These documents also presume that the basis for literacy learning and practice is the school and there is scant acknowledgment of the social embeddedness of literacy recognised by Street (1984). It would seem that the DoE is providing a road map for literacy as if it were a straight line to be followed,

whereas a more iterative responsive is advocated by the New London Group (1996: 64) who suggest a pedagogical approach where

language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve various cultural purposes.

Whether the DoE is aware of other possibilities or is tailoring its guidance to the needs of the majority of teachers, a significant component of literacy in terms of social embeddedness has been overlooked. The DoE approach seems premised on a generic 'one size fits all' approach which ignores the realities of social context and the diverse learning and community contexts in which schooling is situated.

### **5.3.3 The discourse of 'reading as a foundation for advancement'**

Learners themselves seem to be positively disposed towards reading as it is seen as a stepping stone or foundation of a good education. In this they are probably echoing parental sentiments about how reading will help. Generally learners at this school claimed to have been taken to libraries and to be relatively positive about reading. In discussions with grade 8 learners, most learners claimed to be good at reading but could not name titles or authors they had read, which supports Matjila & Pretorius's (2004) assertion that reading has a strong appeal but is a novel process in poorer schools. One learner who indicated she disliked reading elaborated that she was shy and did not like everyone listening to her. Her experiences of school reading were based on learners having to read aloud for marks rather than silently reading for pleasure. Drawing on learners' self-reporting in the PIRLS 2006 report, we could infer some overlap with this cohort who would have been in grade 3 when PIRLS 2006 data were collected.

Although South African learners achieved the lowest overall results in both reading for information and reading for pleasure in the PIRLS 2006 data, they were not at the bottom of all the tables. South African grade 4s claimed to spend up to two hours a day reading for information and reading on the internet (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007). This clearly did not correlate with their achievements in reading for information or in the reported access to computers as only 3% rated highly in terms of home access to educational resources – these included a selection of books in the

home, a desk, a computer, a child's own books and the educational level of one parent. This would seem a significant indicator of reading achievement as this 3%'s score on PIRLS was 528 (Ibid, 111) - one of the few occasions where a statistic for South African learners rose above the PIRLS average of 500 points. However despite purportedly spending the most time on reading for information, fewer South African grade 4s claimed they enjoyed reading compared to other countries at 35% (Ibid, 141).

While my specific learners did not participate in PIRLS and this data was obtained from grade 4 rather than grade 8 learners, the PIRLS data is still relevant. It presents a slice of achievements, attitudes and contributing factors to literacy as captured in South Africa in 2006. It is conceivable that, in general, the learners in this study would have exhibited similar attitudes and achieved at a similar rate a year later when they were in grade 4. The contexts of school, classroom and home, as well as literacy attitudes and practices in all of these contexts, would not have changed significantly for the bulk of the learners since primary school, so PIRLS data is a useful indicator of learners' practices and comments about reading and writing.

#### **5.3.4 The discourse of the 'non-reader'**

Within Bay High School teachers had expressed concerns about grade 8 reading abilities for a number of years and these concerns stimulated this study. Besides statements like "the grade 8s can't read", teachers did not specify what they meant by reading. It is presumed they meant that the grade 8s could not derive meaning from text and some could not decode text fluently as evidenced in a reluctance and an inability to read aloud. This view is supported by the PIRLS data. If the learners at grades 3 and 4 in 2006 were struggling to find explicit information in texts (PIRLS) after three years of instruction in reading, it is unlikely that reading improved after grade 4 when there is less direct instruction either in what Street (1984) terms the 'technology' of reading (i.e. decoding skills) or in specific reading practices. Teachers at high school felt ill-equipped to address any gaps in reading development which they felt should have been dealt with in primary school. In their training and teaching experience they had little exposure to teaching the basic phonics and phoneme awareness that they felt was needed.

## 5.4 Agency at T<sub>1</sub>

### 5.4.1 School and teacher agency

At the time of this study, Curriculum 2005 was in place. This was supported by the Revised National Curriculum Statement (NCS) which was seen as a “streamlining and strengthening” of Curriculum 2005 in response to public comment (DoE, 2002: 6). This Statement envisages teachers as educators who are “key contributors to the transformation of education in South Africa” (Ibid: 9). As well as being qualified, competent, dedicated and caring, they are seen as

mediators of learning, interpreters and designers of Learning Programmes and materials, leaders, administrators and managers, scholars, researchers and lifelong learners, community members, citizens and pastors, assessors and learning area/phase specialists (DoE, 2002: 9).

Much is expected of teachers in the new South Africa as is evident in the many roles they might play. While the Curriculum Statement constructs teachers as having varied responsibilities and with a multiplicity of fluid, evolving roles, it also ignores the role of teachers’ preparation to become this multi-faceted persona. Prinsloo & Janks’ (2002) study of the education systems during apartheid showed how language imposed different requirements on teachers and learners and afforded them different positions to take up. From her analysis of the isiZulu matric paper, Prinsloo and Janks concluded that education in isiZulu prepared learners to read uncritically, to identify morals in stories and to regard authors as experts as “[A]uthority is not challenged in any way and the surface of the text is never scratched” (*ibid*, 28). This practice was not limited to isiZulu as all ‘Bantu’ languages and learners had subaltern status, with strong allegiance to a parochial tribal ethnicity. Prinsloo and Janks argue that these literacy practices imposed different subject positions on learners and teachers. Unless they have regularly been exposed to alternatives, many teachers reproduce the kind of teaching they were exposed to at school. Gennrich and Janks (2013: 457) suggest that teachers’ habitus is deep-grained and unconscious and includes “involvement with and dispositions towards literacy”. Therefore the various roles available for educators in the new curriculum may be at odds with their own schooled literacy practices and their habitus. So while the curriculum suggests teacher agency

to take up a variety of roles, historically-produced subject positions and dispositions may mitigate against these possibilities.

How does the prescribed forward thinking of the NCS combine with an historically disposed mode of subject teaching within school and classroom spaces? To what extent do teachers take up the agential roles inscribed in the Curriculum statements? It is presumed that various teachers take up differing roles according to their own strengths and preferences but these positions are open to educators - and some moved into these spaces in the course of this study. Underpinning each teacher's chosen role is Archer's inner conversation where, through discernment and deliberation, commitment is made to what is termed an 'ultimate concern' (Archer, 2000). This is a reflexive process about our deepest concerns and the costs of committing to them in terms of reconciling the practical and social orders of individuals' lives.

#### **5.4.2 Learner agency**

Although the South African curriculum espouses a learner-centred approach, this does not include giving learners choices or agency in what is learnt or studied via the curriculum or in the classroom. Choice as a motivational contributor to learning is central to Guthrie's (2004; 2013) engagement model of learning. He notes that within the classroom, a sense of selfhood as a reader develops out of practice and in relation to peers. He (2004) suggests that engagement in literacy contributes to identity as a reader, with a growing sense of self as a thinker and learner which in turn motivates the learner to further literacy efforts. This echoes Archer's tracking of personal identities which develop through practice and as part of our embeddedness in society and which "occurs at the interface of 'structure and agency'" (Archer, 2000: 255).

Archer's concept of agency is firstly as a collective, so the grade 8 class at the beginning of the study would share characteristics or life chances. Through reflection on this 'involuntary placement', the individual, or in Archer's terms, the 'primary agent', can recognise constraints and enablements following from this position and take action, or not. Such 'Action' may depend on the structural and cultural emergent properties at play, as well as on the individual's emergent personal identity. At the

outset of the study grade 8s were structurally managed by timetabling and schooling discourses of place and position. Grade 8s were collectively seen as new to the school, at the bottom of the hierarchy and needing to learn their place so as to fit in.

## 5.5 Conclusions

In the chapter I have considered the structural conditions obtaining at  $T_1$  within which the reading clubs would operate from  $T_2$  to  $T_3$ . As such these were well-established and had served to regulate education and condition people's lives in this community for many years prior to this study. These antecedent structures resulted in *normalized* behaviours and expectations within this community and established behavioural and relationship patterns within the school itself. Learners within these structures drew on various established discourses to make sense of their educational experience in general and of reading in particular. As Carter and New (2004: 7) remind us, "People choose what they do, but they make their choices from a structurally and culturally generated range of options – which they do not choose". So, existing discourses informed people's understandings and were mobilized as part of the available range of options. Families, therefore, might choose to send their children to BHS, or to have them educated in English rather than isiXhosa or Afrikaans, because of these existing structures and discourses. While families and learners might regard education as the gateway to better paying employment, both the educational structures and societal conditioning constrained their options thereby serving to keep them in working-class positions.

## CHAPTER 6

### READING CLUBS FROM T<sub>2</sub> TO T<sub>3</sub>

*Reading is like walking into another world and when you get there you'll learn its secret. (Ana, grade 8c, final journal reflection)*

#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the processes involved in establishing reading club practices as well as the discussions that occurred around the books read in the eight different reading clubs. In addition to the reading clubs themselves it was necessary to create a context which would be conducive to a reading culture and the practices associated with it. Although reading clubs occurred within the language classroom and the library, the school, as the overarching context should not be seen as the 'container' of practice. According to Ivanic (2005: 8)

Context has more recently been conceptualised rather as a relational phenomenon, in which the 'text' – what is going on – cannot be separated from the 'con' – which accompanies it.

As alluded to in Chapter 3, schools, to some extent, can be seen to be invested in an autonomous model of literacy which assumes that with literacy will come "higher cognitive skill, improved economic performance, greater equality, and so on" (Street, 2005: 417). This will, it is believed, happen *autonomously* as a result of developing reading and writing skills. Reading and writing in this model is a specific Western essayist practice characterised by explicitness and abstraction (Street, 1984, 1996). In contrast, the ideological model considers how literacy is used in context and so the social uses of literacy in peoples' lives is recognised. Literacy practices or 'events', in Heath's (1983) terms, are embedded in social contexts in which they are functional in people's lives. In this study, the context is the school reading club in a wider working-class context as described in chapter 5. Street (1984: 29) shows how context is critical to understanding literacy practices as each practice is "constructed out of special social conditions and in relation to specific political and economic structures". Within the analysis of reading clubs, attention is paid to the interpersonal "socially-conditioned aspects of literacy" (*ibid*: 43), in order to understand how

learners made sense of their reading. If reading clubs are sites for social practices of literacy, then “[B]ecoming proficient at literacy viewed as a set of social practices is largely a matter of participating in them” (Van Enk, Dagenais & Toohey, 2005: 498). Greene (1982: 327) suggests that “teaching for literacy conceives learning as action rather than behavior” and that it involves trying out what has been learnt by rote in an opening of possibilities rather than a mastery of competencies. Interactions in reading clubs became classroom practice in the English class. These were social sites for joint negotiation and mediation of meanings. In critical realist terms, reading clubs were events at the level of the Actual which structurally (in terms of organisation and resources) endorsed negotiated understandings (based on cultural theories and beliefs at the level of the Real) and ways of being readers.

As self-chosen units each reading club constituted a community of readers engaged in a dialogical understanding of their reading. Reading clubs, where the learners were in “a state of becoming” (Moore & Cunningham, 2006: 142), are the central focus of this study. As reading clubs occurred in class time it was also important to be mindful of DoE curriculum documental prescriptions regarding the meta-language of literature. So such terms as *plot*, *character*, *setting* and *theme* in relation to the novel were explored in the ongoing practice of the reading clubs by modelling and applying them to different works. Because the goal of the study involved examining learners’ identities as readers, a personal response, in line with Rosenblatt (1983), was encouraged. The challenge in a literature class is how to make learners apprentices in thinking and talking about literary texts (Townsend & Pace, 2005) and this is even more so if there has not been a culture of reading, either in school or in learners’ homes, and where few books have been available to learners. So in essence, what was developed in reading clubs was two specific and complementary, literacies – the literacy of the school literature curriculum, with concepts such as *plot*, *character* and so on, and the literacy response *a la* Rosenblatt. Developing such a literacy culture requires a process of *enculturation* as it involves apprenticeship into social practices “through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse”<sup>12</sup> (Gee, 1996: 139). The notion of ‘apprentice into a

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<sup>12</sup> As indicated earlier in this thesis, I move between Gee’s construct of ‘Discourse’ (deliberately capitalized) signaling a ‘role’ which can be played and that of ‘discourse’ which is used in the sense of a set of ideas existing in language, or some other sign system, which constrains or enables what can

practice' derives from Lave and Wenger's (1991) work with communities of practice and is recognised by Bartlett (2005: 3) as a means of "acquiring new social identities and literacies" This is in line with Vygotskian sociocultural understandings of learning where an expert, or in this case of schools, the teacher, models and guides the learner in the particular cognitive activity. The child moves from being a spectator to a novice and gradually becomes more experienced and adept. The teacher's role is reduced as the child demonstrates greater competence (Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

### **6.1.1 Structure culture and agency in reading clubs**

In terms of Archer's analytical dualism, it is necessary from the outset to separate the strands of structure and culture in relation to agency and thereby understand the workings of the reading clubs. Within the morphogenetic framework it is also important to map the elements of structure culture and agency within the reading clubs at different stages so as to be able to explore the interplay between these three domains.

#### **6.1.1.1 Structure**

Within the established structures of the school and the classroom, reading clubs were introduced as yet another structure. As mentioned earlier, they operated parallel to the predominantly whole-class teaching in the school. How the groups were structured and interactions organised is outlined in the next section on the formation of reading clubs. It was hoped that reading clubs would offer an alternative site and space to interact with literature so the formation of reading club structures would enable rather than restrain engaged reading practices. If the fundamental basis of thought is practice-based (Archer, 2007a), learners can only see themselves as readers by engaging in the practice and 'doing' reading, thus reaffirming the 'primacy of practice' in the development of a sense of self.

#### **6.1.1.2 Culture**

Initially reading club interactions focused on developing talk about books. As the domain of culture is discursively constituted, reading clubs introduced 'alternative'

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be said, done, believed, valued and so on. My use of the term 'discourse' therefore stresses the ideological and is intended to signal the ideational component rather than being inclusive of practices.

discourses about reading on which learners could draw to effect shifts in identity. At the same time, reading clubs drew on dominant, school-based discourses about the study of literature – hence the introduction of concepts such as *plot* and so on. This satisfied DoE curriculum requirements and prepared learners for the literary meta-language they would encounter in their schooling trajectories. So reading clubs were structured to address mandated cultural issues as laid down in the curriculum. However because the clubs were led by the learners, in that the learners took on the responsibility and role of talk, they could draw on a wider range of discourses – not necessarily the dominant discourse – to make sense of the literature and make it meaningful in their lives.

### **6.1.1.3 Agency**

Agency is tricky to unpack. It is usually limited and contingent upon structures, especially within a school setting. By virtue of their position within the educational hierarchy, learners have limited agency and any agency which is ‘given’ to them immediately seems to undercut any real ownership of the interactions. With this understanding of the educational enterprise, learners had some agency within the reading club intervention. For the most part learners owned the reading club process and took up agency firstly in the reading of the assigned novels and secondly in the participation in book talk. Allowing learners some agency meant they cooperated in recording their discussions or some chose to delete their recordings and others chose to have the discussion first and then subsequently to record the outcome. Others forgot about the recording and sang and chatted away in isiXhosa long after the booktalk was completed. The majority of the reading club discussions were not recorded and, later in this chapter, I note how the process of recording impacted both on the exercise of agency and the cultural resources that learners drew upon to make sense of their reading or to present themselves. Journal writing also offered agential opportunities which learners took up differently and this will be explored in the next chapter.

### **6.1.2 Organisation of data**

As I have already indicated, this chapter, and the next, is structured as a series of *vignettes* of events that occurred chronologically at the level of the Actual. The vignettes offer windows into the reading club process where learners’ thinking about

books can be explored in detail. These include library conversations, reading club interactions, in this chapter, and journal writing in the next, over the period termed  $T_2$  to  $T_3$ . I am interested in learners' agential marshalling of accessible cultural resources to make sense of the literature in a very personally meaningful way within the ambit of the reading clubs as well as to engage with terms such as 'plot', 'theme' and 'character' comprising what I have termed 'the discourse of the book'. So the focus is on the cultural resources that were mobilized and how agency and culture worked within the reading club structures to give learners access to the dominant discourses related to reading and books and also to Discourses which feature reading practices.

The series of vignettes mapped out graphically in Figure 6.1 below includes instances of my agency as researcher. The focus of this study is not my agency, however. Rather I was concerned to see how learners exercised their agency to engage with books and take up 'booktalk'. My agency is included in Figure 6.1 in order to provide an indication of the way I facilitated the reading clubs and to locate vignettes in the reading club structure.

My interest in collecting data was in capturing book *talk*, which is the focus of this chapter. This shifts slightly with the introduction of journals to an interest in the *written* discourse of books which follows in Chapter 7. From listening to reading club discussions and missing some – due to the number of groups and school and class structures – I decided to introduce journal writing to supplement and enhance talking. Journal writing is therefore represented in the third band, *Writing*, and, as indicated visually in the diagram, became a significant focus of the study as the practice was taken up, or not, by certain learners. In critical realist terms, all data emerges in the transitive domain. From this data, it is possible to conceptualise 'events' at the level of the Actual. For example, learners recording a discussion or completing a feedback slip can be conceptualized as an event or a series of events. As the researcher, I generated the events, together with the learners. Via these events I could get access to learners' observations about books, about reading, about themselves as readers, in other words, experiences and observations were embedded in the events. So from these vignettes, which gave me access to the Actual and the Empirical, I had to abduct and retroduct to the Real. This process allowed me to identify structures and

culture (as discourses) and to see change which results (or does not result) as learners exercise their agency in relation to these domains. The vignettes, in the blue band of 'Talking', are the focus of this chapter. The 'Writing' band is the focus of Chapter 7. The downward and upward arrows indicate how practices of talking and writing informed each other, and informed my actions as a research agent. This was an ongoing iterative process.

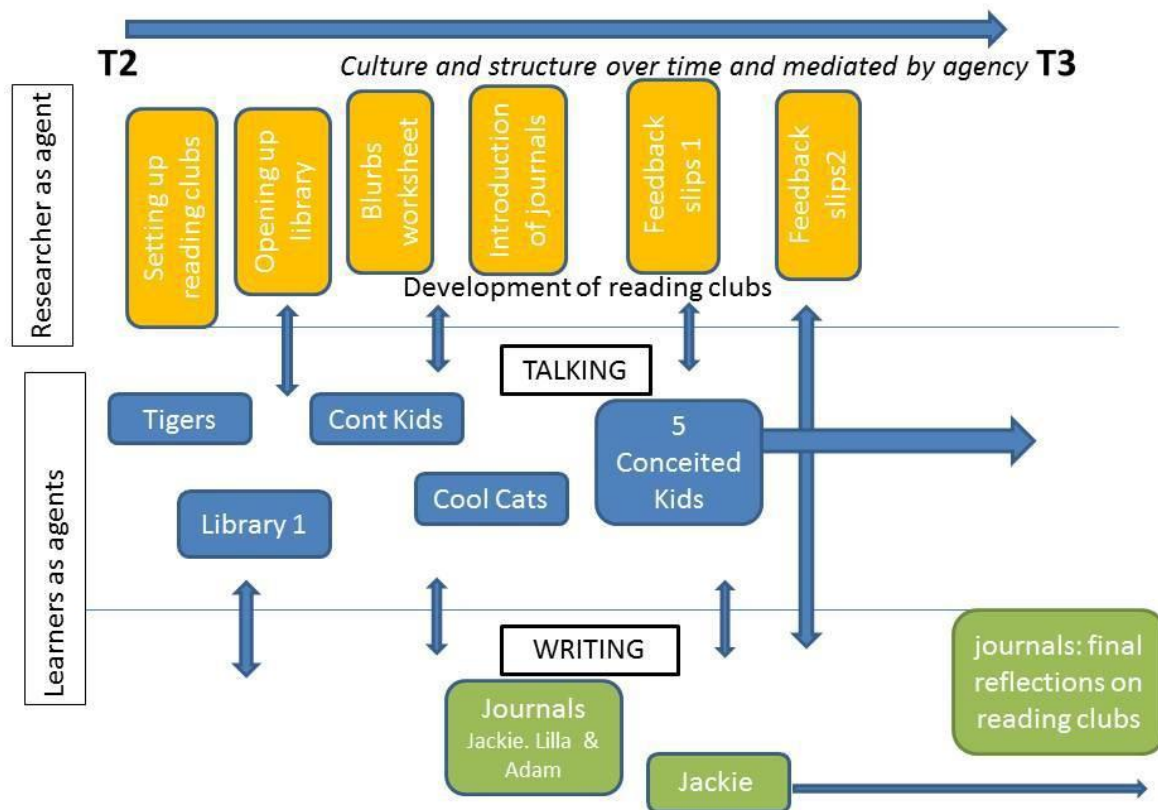


Figure 6.1 Vignettes of Reading Club process from T<sub>2</sub> to T<sub>3</sub>

## 6.2 Formation of reading clubs

The club meetings can be conceptualized as a series of events at the level of the Actual, which offered a safe site in which learners did not have to provide the correct answer to the teacher's question, which is a pervasive school literacy practice (Hinchman & Chandler-Olcott, 2006; Smagorinsky & O' Donnell-Allen, 1998). Indeed with high stakes testing increasing in South Africa, many youth feel – with some justification – that their success and achievement at school is predicated on giving the correct answer. Instead the reading clubs were a time for the different members to interact dialogically, interweaving their responses with references to the texts to

extend their understanding. Having to talk, meant having to formulate thoughts about the texts and present them in an accessible form to others.

While reading clubs allowed for agency in talk, in doing so they veered from Cazden's (2001) usual patterns of classroom talk, referred to earlier. Removing this usual pattern of structure may be quite bewildering as learners have been enculturated into these discourse patterns from early schooling. If learners were comfortable with teacher initiated questions to which only one or two learners responded, changing to a situation which demanded individual responses could be quite disconcerting. If the usual pattern has been removed, what pattern could replace it? Providing a pattern or outline to group discussions was ongoing as learners were now being enculturated into 'booktalk'.

### **6.2.1 Agency in reading club formation**

The class of forty learners was invited to organise themselves into reading clubs, consisting of about five learners, by the class teacher, Ms Loti. She further asked the groups to choose a name for their group and present it with an explanation motivating their choice to the rest of class. This initial organisation by the class teacher established her support and impetus for the reading clubs and also marked it as a legitimate class structure within official class times and procedures. This exercise of agency indicated a willingness to engage with reading in new ways for both the teacher and the learners.

Learners' self-organisation into groups immediately allowed choice both in their selection of peers and in naming their groups. Although it could be argued that this occurred within the parameters of school structuring and at the teacher's discretion, it was a choice that learners were given and proved to be an initial motivator in line with Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) model of engaged learning. Each group was then given a set of books to read, with eight different titles being given to the eight different groups.

### **6.2.2 Reading club material**

As mentioned, the school library had not functioned as a library for a number of years. There had been previous attempts at developing reading and sets of

simplified readers were stored in the library. These simplified classics provided the starting material for the reading clubs. So the availability of the texts determined what the reading clubs could read. We chose texts where there were between five and six copies available as most reading club groups would consist of that number of members. Table 6.1 below indicates the texts which were available initially as well as the titles that were added in the course of the study.

Titles used in Reading Clubs at Bay High School							
	Title	Publisher	Author	Level	Pages	Date	Source
1	Shane	Heinemann	Shaefer	Intermediate	86	April	library
2	The boy who was afraid	Heinemann	Sperry	Elementary	52	April	library
3	The Road to Nowhere	Heinemann	Milne	Elementary	48	April	library
4	True Grit	OUP (Progressive English readers)	Portis	grade 1	55	April	library
5	The haunted taxi driver	Heinemann	Sekyi	JAWS level3	56	April	library
6	Don't tell me what to do	Heinemann	Hardcastle	Elementary	58	April	library
7	The Runaways	Heinemann	Canning	Elementary	56	April	library
8	David Copperfield	Nelson English Language Teaching	Dickens	level 3	89	April	library
9	Rainman	Pearson Longman	Fleisher	Level3 Pre-intermediate	42	May	donated
10	Mpho's Search	OUP (Southern African Writing)	Braude	trade	95	July	bookroom
11	My father and I	MML (Young Africa Series)	Williams	trade	103	July	bookroom
13	Great snake of Kalungu	Juventus	van Straten	trade	117	July	bookroom
14	Seedfolks	Joanna CotlerBooks (Harper Collins imprint)	Fleischman	Ages 10 up	102	July	bought6
15	Cry the Beloved Country	Pearson Longman	Paton	Level 6 advanced	93	Aug	donated
16	4 Weddings and a funeral	Pearson Longman	Curtis	level 5 Upper Intermediate	67	Aug	donated
17	Hatchet	Simon Pulse (Simon & Shuster)	Paulsen	trade	189	Oct	bought 6
18	Tomorrow when the war began	Scholastic	Marsden	trade	276	Oct	bought 6
19	Daddy Long Legs	Puffin classics	Webster	trade	181	Oct	bought 6

Table 6.1 Titles used in Reading Clubs

The first eight titles provided the starting material for the reading clubs. As they were short simplified readers, we hoped learners would find them accessible and engaging. The ninth title, *The Rainman*, had been used with grade 8s before: copies were donated and added to the pool. Other titles were added in the course of the study in the order listed above.

As mentioned, under the instruction of the class teacher, Ms Loti, learners organised themselves into groups of five. One group chose to have six learners as someone new had joined the class in April. Another group consisted of four learners. It would seem that most groups self-selected friends who were already sitting in close proximity. Each group was randomly given one of the titles from the first eight listed in Table 6.1 and given time to start reading them in class. Instructions were given about the care of the books and the need to return them the following week. Because of the diverse stories, Ms Loti did not activate prior knowledge or encourage predictions and the class was encouraged to read the books to be able to talk about them.

### **6.2.3 Formation of reading clubs: structure, culture and agency**

Structurally learners were organised into groups and had books to read so the new concept of a reading club began to overlap with existing school and grade organizational patterns. As a classroom practice that both learners and teachers could engage in, reading clubs themselves needed further planning, so that learners were comfortable and sufficiently confident to take up their agency in group discussions. To provide an example of how a reading club discussion could be structured, a fishbowl reading club was held for one group, the Cool Cats to discuss their book, *The boy who was afraid*, with me while the other groups watched. Questions asked included *What did you like about the book? Was there a main character and what happened to him? What was your favourite part of the book? Which moment was the most important in the story? Was there anything confusing or difficult about the book/ words? Anything that was different about the setting or place?* As this discussion happened in front of their classmates and learners had not prepared for a public discussion, *think-pair-share* was used to enable them to rehearse their response before sharing with the group. This also allowed all members to talk quietly to each other before one of each pair shared with the bigger

group. For the viewers it also showed how to allow all members time and opportunity to organise their thinking about the books read. Although at the end of the study, two members of the Cool Cats shared in their final interview that they had never had a whole book to read before, at the initial reading club demonstration it appeared that all members had engaged with the book sufficiently to be able to reflect on the main character, Mafatu, and how he overcame his fear of the sea. In response to the question about the most important moment, one response was “It’s when he came back and saw the light from the... and followed the light.” And when probed further this group member said this meant he was “coming out of the darkness” and “He wasn’t scared of the cruel sea anymore”.

Through this initial reading club demonstration, various practices such as turn-taking and listening to each other were modelled, and learners were introduced to ideas existing in the cultural domain such as constructs of *character* and *setting*. In addition learners were allowed the agency to voice a personal response and comment on the book so their classmates could see that answers were valued and could be extended. After this initial exercise, as a class, guidelines for the reading clubs were generated, and while the other seven clubs had their initial meetings, the Cool Cats captured the guidelines as a classroom poster to be displayed and referred to so that all the groups could regulate their interactions. As the various groups met and discussed it was clear that not all members had read their books and some wanted another week so not all groups changed books every week. The practice of a weekly time and space in the language class to talk about their books remained even if learners had only read part of their books.

So the initial phase of the reading clubs involved setting up structures within structures which included the allocation of reading materials and the establishment of an alternative classroom practice, albeit once a week. In addition the reading club demonstration clearly offered ways of being readers and responding to reading that contrasted with established spatial and discourse practices of the school. In the following section I will explore the way learners exercised their agency in relation to the newly developed structural and cultural conditions in which they found themselves.

### 6.3 Agential positions in discussions about books

As already indicated, talking about books was a central practice in the reading club classes. Talking to peers, as opposed to a teacher or to the whole-class, afforded learners more opportunities to participate in the discussions about books in an effort to develop “nuanced multilayered interpretations” (Hinchman & Peyton-Young, 2001: 244). These peer-lead structures allowed learners to have more agency in engaging with the books as they could mobilise their thinking, formulate responses, and share safely. The context of the school and the reading clubs in the English classes, meant that this was an ‘in principle’ agency as the various structures had established certain parameters for its exercise. As an alternative space to the teacher directed classroom (Alvermann, 2000), I had hoped learners would negotiate collaboratively using cumulative and exploratory talk (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997) to build dialogic understandings of the texts. The latter is what I was looking for in particular: what did learners say about the novels and how were they using some of the meta theory of literary discourse? So, as already indicated, what I will term the ‘discourse of the book’ was introduced to learners as a means of constructing engagement with books. As the terminology associated with this discourse was not completely new to the learners, I hoped that familiarity with the terms, *character* and *setting*, for instance, would enable them to use these meaningfully from their first meeting. Thus, as structures, reading clubs were alternative discursive spaces allowing for greater learner participation and the exercise of agency. The clubs, as structures, provided learners with space to exercise their agency and draw on discursively constituted ideas about books existing in the domain of culture. Thus we see the interplay of culture and structure as learners exercised their agency in participating in clubs through booktalk.

Gilles and Pierce (2003) suggest that the tentative, inchoate, ‘rough draft’ kind of talk, are evidence of understanding so it is this kind of talk we want to hear in the classroom as learners process new knowledge. They suggest that listening to learners articulating their thinking offers us a “window on learning”. Listening to what is said is both “a way for students to learn as well as a central window on what is learned” (Ibid: 56). As mentioned in Chapter 4, from their analysis of how children use talk, Wegerif and Mercer (1997) developed a dialogical framework which recognised different types of talk as disputational, cumulative and exploratory talk.

They sound a cautionary note about categories but their dialogic framework provides a useful heuristic for discussing how talk is used in the different reading groups. Gilles & Pierce recognise Barnes's (1976) use of exploratory talk as "talk in which students created meaning together by exploring and crafting from one another's ideas" (Gilles & Pierce, 2003: 63). This talk is uncertain and hesitant with false starts and inchoate ideas from which learners create meaning together and is very prevalent in reading club discussions.

Most of the discussions about books involved the learners leading their own discussions, with occasional visits from me asking them further questions. So from a critical realist perspective, interactions in the clubs were at the level of the Actual as the discussion emerged from the interplay of structure and culture. In the early stages, some groups stated who the main character was and what the setting was: they then described the story and so completed their 'discussion' very promptly. This approach seemed to be about completing the requirements as quickly as possible without any real engagement or development of ideas. In order to provoke discussion I asked groups additional questions to engage them in an extended discussion. This seemed to be contrary to their work ethic of prompt completion and of what constitutes a 'good' student, so many of the initial recordings reflect this striving to finish the discussion. Drawing on school practices of finding the 'correct answer', some discussed their book and when they knew what to say, switched on the recording, so that only the rehearsed and group-approved understanding was captured and exploratory talk was lost. In those cases, often only one person spoke on behalf of the group with some promptings. Other groups did not manage to record themselves in the first meetings, or chose not to do so.

I start the series of vignettes with an informal discussion in the *library*, which I used as an alternative 'booktalk' space. The learners were all from the reading clubs and had chosen to come and talk with me informally about books. The location of the next few vignettes switches to the *reading clubs* with discussions by the Tigers, on the first day of reading clubs, followed by discussions, recorded a few weeks after the Tigers' inputs: these came from three other groups namely, the Contagious Kids, the Cool Cats and the Five Conceited Kids. In the vignette of the Five Conceited

Kids, I trace their agency in drawing on discourses of popular culture and different literary practices to engage in 'booktalk' over a series of weeks.

### **6.3.1 Reading 'face' and 'mushfaking' *Great Expectations* with Linda**

In terms of Gee's (2000b) identities, library visitors could be seen as displaying an affinity with reading in choosing to spend free time in a book space and so could be termed A-identities. However an affinity or interest in reading did not always translate into practice as identities are fluid and variable regardless of how useful labels may be. Velile and his group, the Youth Representatives, had been assigned a graded reader version of *David Copperfield* as their first reading club book. At 89 pages, it was the longest of our first books and I had feared that Victorian England and Dickensian writing would be off-putting for these young South African students. In their first discussion they shared their enthusiasm for David and his difficulties and admired him for coping so well with his challenges in contrast with children they knew who, when faced with difficulties, had resorted to crime and drugs. Three members of the group were most outspoken about their enjoyment of the book and this probably masked any difficulties the other two members encountered. As a result of his enjoyment of *David Copperfield*, Velile had visited me in the library asking for another book by the *David Copperfield* author and took a graded reader version of *Bleak House* for himself as well as a New Windmill version of *Great Expectations* which he thought his friend, Linda, would enjoy. The latter was a version written for children but not as simplified as *David Copperfield* in terms of vocabulary and storyline.

So, after a week, Velile and Linda visited me in the library to return and discuss these books. Velile had not enjoyed *Bleak House* and returned it but was delighted that he had been correct in his assessment of his friend Linda. He had recognised her as a reader and supported this aspect of identity (Gee, 2000a) by taking library books to pass on to her. Linda, in turn, affirms his assessment of her as someone who enjoyed *David Copperfield* and would also enjoy *Great Expectations*, as the following extract from the recording of our conversation shows:

ES: So then you read something else

Linda: Great Expectations

ES: Did you read it?

Linda: Yes

Velile: I told you Ma'am, she's going to like this book

ES: And?

Linda: Oh, I like this book.

Velile: I told you!

Linda goes on to volunteer feedback on the novel as “educating”, “changing of life” and “challenges” which echoed some of the group’s assessment of *David Copperfield*:

Linda: It's so educating. Umm I mean like, it's about changing of life, and, umm challenges, umm yes...

It would seem that Linda had used these comments, or similar ones, to good effect before and thought that was sufficient to indicate her appreciation of the novel. Whereas in a group, learners can build on each other’s contributions to create an understanding of the story, here she was on her own. This initial response did not reflect a reading of *Great Expectations* to anyone who had actually read the book but for Velile and the others in the library it was sufficient. It was clear from our ongoing conversation here that Linda knew nothing about *Great Expectations*. Her technique was to wait for my questions and agree with my answers, so when I asked “was that the one with Miss Havisham?” she answered “yes” as if it had just slipped her mind.

ES: Ok. So you read *Great Expectations* and you (to Velile) had *Bleak House*. Interesting that we're doing Dickens, hmm. So you enjoyed *Great Expectations*?

Linda: Very much

ES: And which character did you, uh, find interesting? They're fascinating people. Pause. Ja?

Linda: silent

ES: Is that the one with Miss Havisham?

Linda: Yes, yes,

ES: And? Pause. Was she an appealing character?

Linda: Very much

Again when I asked “was she an appealing character?” she answered “Yes” but could not back it up with any detail. Then when I asked about the main character, she could not answer but agreed when I mentioned the little boy called Pip.

ES: All right. *Great Expectations*. Who was the main character?

Linda: umm ...

ES: The little boy?

Linda: Yes.

ES: Pip.

Linda: Yes, yes.

How can we understand Linda’s presentation of herself as a reader? Within this study she was ascribed an identity as a reader by Velile. In his introduction of Linda to me, he constructed her as a reader who would enjoy the books he selected for her. Linda herself maintains this position by claiming to have read the book and to offer an assessment of it. Clearly being constructed as a reader was something she wanted to maintain as she valued this construction of herself. Sounding enthusiastic and voicing vague generalisations about reading had probably worked for her before and maybe she thought that that was what talking about books entailed. Maybe this was a model of ‘booktalk’ she had seen and she was now emulating the generalized model without the actual reading. It is possible that within her school experience she had encountered teachers who covered their lack of knowledge of a text with vague generalized statements such as these so this behaviour is drawn from her repertoire of knowledge of ‘booktalk’. Scollon and Scollon (1981) recognise the presentation of self as involving choice of words, tone, attitude and topic. Conversation participants present a particular view of themselves as they negotiate their understandings. My concern was not whether Linda had read *Great Expectations* or not, but rather I wanted to understand what she had read and understood, so I participated in maintaining her ‘face’ in the interaction. Linda’s ability to make sense of her reading became apparent later in our discussion when we moved on to Pip’s first meeting with Miss Havisham.

Linda: And her hair’s so white.

ES: Yes.

Linda: That refers that she's old.

ES: Yes, she's old. And she's still dressed in her wedding dress. Why do you think she's still dressed in her wedding dress?

Linda: Maybe, I'd say that, umm something happened, when she was marrying and then, she couldn't forget about that. Maybe that dress reminds her of that day.

ES: Yes. So do you know what happened?

Linda: No

ES: She was getting ready for her wedding day but the man she was going to marry jilted her

Velile: What's jilted?

ES: Didn't turn up. He broke off the wedding on the wedding day when she was half ready.

Linda: that's why she's been wearing this dress for ages, years and years.

Although here Linda admits not knowing a detail of the story – for the first time in our discussion about the book – she also demonstrates her insight and ability to infer from the text. She can see that a watershed event occurred to derail Miss Havisham's wedding plans and that this event has marked her: that she is frozen in time from that moment. Linda is also willing to adjust her previous statement that Miss Havisham was middle-aged to old, based on the description of her gaunt, white-haired appearance. Her first assessment of Miss Havisham's age is revisited, based on specific details here so Linda is continually monitoring her understanding and here uses evidence from the text as a comprehension checking device. Linda is clearly demonstrating skills in reading and in integrating knowledge in her head, like predictions, with new information from the story. So she is a skilled reader in inferring from the text, adjusting her mental model and monitoring her comprehension. She is adept at 'mushfaking' which, according to Gee, involves "partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge and strategies to make do... with something less when the real thing is not available" (Gee, 1990: 13). Often a mushfake Discourse is enough to get by as was the case here – as Linda's peers, for whom literary discourse is more alien, in general are impressed by her literary assertions.

Primary school reading practices had established a Discourse of being a 'good reader'. In Linda's final journal reflections she wrote that she was 'inspired' to read in

grade 6 and that she would read “more and more, everything I could reach, a newspaper, Magazine etc”. She further relates

‘in grade 7 I was 1 of the students whom the principal wanted to see in his office in terms of reading I even got a certificate for reading as fast as I could’

Here the school practice of reading valued ‘fast’, and presumably ‘enthusiastic’, following from her being ‘inspired’, reading of shorter texts as found in magazines and newspapers. Linda’s accomplishment in this literacy practice was recognised by the institution that accorded her a *position* as a reader. This *institutional* identity, in Gee’s terms, allows authorities to ‘author’ positions and to ‘author’ the occupants of these positions (2000b). As identities overlap and interrelate, so Linda’s institutional identity as a ‘good reader’ was reinforced by a *discoursal* identity as accorded by Velile in another school a year later. That these positions were valued by Linda is evident in her choosing to come to the library and align herself with other readers in an *affinity* identity. So Linda’s sense of self is tied up with being a good reader at many levels, however, it is derived from particular literacy practices valued at primary school. Reading short texts and getting the ‘gist’ of a newspaper article (with its attendant semiotic elements such as headings, pictures, and font), is a different practice to reading *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, even in simplified form. At a structural level it would seem that primary schools did not have children’s literature available, hence the practice of reading cheaper, more available texts. This practice was supported by other learners’ comments in the final interviews. For example two boys from the Cool Cats reported that the reading club was the first time they had a complete book to read and take home, and Jackie, from the Contagious Kids, noted her frustration at being given photocopied excerpts from books as comprehension exercises and not being able to read the entire book. These structural constraints of lack of reading material conditioned learners from the early grades to develop particular dispositions towards reading. At a cultural level from Linda’s experiences, being a quick reader who ‘read’ a volume of texts was most important. As a ‘good’ student Linda exercised her agency to become accomplished at this practice. While school practices of recognising and rewarding ‘good readers’ establishes the value of reading in the schools, it also sets up external rewards as motivational factors, which Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) noted, were more effective in the short term. The disjuncture in reading practices between primary

schools and high schools, therefore, goes some way to explaining the frustration of high school teachers who felt that the new intake of grade 8 learners ‘could not read’.

As indicated earlier, the next vignettes focus on *reading club discussions* of specific groups as listed in Table 6.2 below. Sometimes discussions extended over two or three recordings in the same lesson, as indicated by the times listed. Bracketed times indicate a second recording which has not been included in the analysis.

Club	Number present	Time	Title
Tigers	5 members	4.31	<i>Don't tell me what to do</i>
Contagious Kids	3/ 4 members	1:59 (+ 1:40)	<i>The boy who was afraid</i>
Cool Cats	5 members	9.23 (+ 6:20)	<i>Seedfolks</i>
Five Conceited Kids	4 members	3.31	1. <i>My Father and I</i>
Five Conceited Kids	5 members	3.09; 7.17; 7.48	2. <i>Don't tell me what to do</i>
Five Conceited Kids	3 members	6.45 (+ 4.23)	3. <i>Seedfolks</i>

Table 6.2 Reading club group's times and titles

### 6.3.2 Discussion as performance, or not: the Tigers talk about *Don't tell me what to do*

Following from the modelled reading club discussion with the Cool Cats, the Tigers recorded their first discussion on the novel, *Don't tell me what to do* in the library. I set up the recorder for them, asked their names, and left them to record their responses while I listened to other groups. The Tigers were concerned about maintaining their discussion for the recording so there is echoing of what is said which supports the group's progress. Uncertainty, new roles, and recordings may have contributed to some nerves which manifested in regular giggling as group members took up new roles in the discussion. There are also giggles when speakers elaborate on a position. Below is an excerpt from their first discussion when the group was invited to discuss the main character of their book.

Gerri: Hello.

*Giggles*

*Whispers*: Tom.

Gerri: (*Whispers*) The main character is Tom.

Leo: Tom.

Zimi: (*Whispers*) The main character is Tom.

Lilla: (*Loudly*) Ja the main character is Tom. Leo what did you think about Tom?

Leo: Well, he,

Eran: Tom went on an adventure and ran away from home

Leo: Home.

Eran: And he's a bit ambitious, and,

*Giggles*

Eran: Because of his adventure he landed up in trouble and, got scared

Leo: Ja

*Giggles*

Lilla: So what do you think, um, the trouble with Tom was? Why did he, land up in trouble? Zola?

In this extract, one group member, Lilla, exercises her agency to draw on school-related Discourses. In doing so she assumes a 'teacherly' role in the discussion by asking questions to which she already knows the answers of other participants. In the absence of the teacher/expert figure she assumes this role in taking her group through the issues to be discussed. Her 'teacherly' authority extends to calling on group members – generally the quieter ones – to answer. For the most part, her group supports her 'teacherly' stance by answering her questions and prompting her with a script. This concern with group cohesion is part of the 'ground-rules' of cumulative talk according to Wegerif and Mercer (1997: 55), who note that this cooperative talk "can lead to knowledge construction through the sharing of perspectives". Lesley (2009) suggests how *performance* of reading is integral to young adults' understandings of what constitutes 'good reading' and here we see a performance of a 'good' reading club interaction using cumulative talk and involving all group members.

In the next section Lilla continues to work towards school Discourse but she and Gerri are aware that she is acting in a teacher's role which amuses them both.

Leo: Rola?

Zola: Don't call me that name

*Giggles*

Gerri: Speak man, Zola!

Leo: Speak!

*(Whispering)* Ok, Ok.

Lilla: Ok, I think the reason Tom fell in so much trouble was that he trusted people too much.

Leo: Ja too much.

*(Giggles)*

Lilla: He landed up in a lot of trouble, with, believing that he has to go scuba diving for diamonds, diamonds, *(giggles)* instead it was, *(whispers)* what was it?

Eran: Heroin.

*(Giggles)*

Lilla: Heroin.

Zola: Why did Masters make him?

Lilla: Because he wanted to become a, a jockey.

Leo: A jockey hey.

Eran: He was ambitious, for money.

Leo: For money.

Gerri: *(Whispers)* And his father wanted him to work in an office.

Leo: *(Loudly)* His father wanted him to work in an office.

Lilla: And he told people, umm...

Eran & Gerri: Masters and Shirley.

Lilla: He told, Masters and Shirley, the people that met him on the way, when he was on his way to England, to London, that his parents are dead and he had no parents, but his parents were alive and he just got into much more trouble than he was.

*(Whispering)*

Lilla: Zola, what do you think?

Zola: Eeuh

Lilla: Tell me what do you think ... umm, Tom did too easily? Why did he trust, umm why did he trust, Shirley too much?

Zola: Because she was so nice to him.

*(Giggles)*

Eran: *(Whispers)* She fell in love.

*(Giggles)*

Gerri: She fell in love with him.

*(Giggles)*

Lilla: Eran?

*(Giggles)*

Gerri : *(Whispers)* Tom fell in love with Shirley

Lilla: Ja, Tom fell in love with Shirley and he trusted Masters too easily and the way Masters spoke to him. He wanted more money for the job because he said the job was dangerous but in the end he never received his money because, Masters died.

Eran: Ok. So how do you think nêê, the main character grew?

Lilla: He grew, emotionally, physically and mentally because it strengthened him a whole lot and what he was, made him stronger than what he was before the previous time that didn't crook.

Eran: Ok. And you Gerri?

*(Giggles)*

Eran: Ok, blank

Lilla: Blank!

*(Giggles) (Whispers)* Stop, stop it! *(Referring to the tape recorder)*

Generally this first recording of a reading club interaction follows a question and answer format with various contributions building on each other cumulatively. The careful listening and echoing reflects a dialogic process of shared utterances. As an electric spark only occurs when two different terminals are hooked together (Bakhtin in Wegerif & Mercer, 1997), so through these utterances, learners connect to make meaning. Mercer suggests that through children's talk we have access to their meaning making processes. Dialogism is a useful theory in examining learners' thinking: for example Wegerif and Mercer (1997: 51) suggest that dialogism offers

the “central insight that understanding always requires more than one voice or perspective”. So, in addition to the agency to take up school related Discourse, the reading club, as a structure provides space for learners to exercise their agency to jointly construct meaning. We see learners in this reading club discussion collaborate in a meaning-making construction of their novel. Lilla’s ‘teacherly’ role is just that: an act that she maintains through the support of her group. Together they build a shared presentation of their understanding of the book.

While recognising the collaborative nature of the Tiger’s discussion here, it is also important to recognise the cultural resources drawn on in this interaction. The main voice heard in the discussion is Lilla’s. She seems to have taken up the available school Discourse of the ‘good’ teacher figure who leads others and directs their understanding of what is important to know in this particular novel. She seems to feel responsible for keeping the conversation going and the others whisper prompts to her and provide her with an appropriate script at times so that their performance as a group is sustained. She alternates between asking questions, usually based on the content, to which she already knows the answers, which she addresses to her group members, and answering her own or other’s questions. The ‘good’ teacher involves many learners via questions. She also provides her own answers should that be necessary and demonstrates her understanding of the plot. Towards the end Eran challenges her ‘teacherly’ position by asking “How do **you** think the main character grew?” to which Lilla, in the role of the ‘good’ teacher, replies very confidently and broadly. No-one questions her statement or asks for verification or some evidence as to Tom’s emotional or physical growth; probably the good teacher does not face challenges or queries either so her group is complicit in her performance. It would seem that asking the teachers to verify statements is not part of their available practice, or her peers chose to support her teacherly stance by not challenging her and thus maintain group cohesion. Both her role as the teacher, and Eran’s as the confident pupil, provoke much laughter among the group indicating an awareness of the roles they are playing for this recording. Together, in this dialogic interaction, as a reading club they were afforded space and agency to comment on this story and through a cumulative process presented a group understanding which they might not have achieved on an individual level. While this group reaches some shared understanding of the book, they do so by replicating existing school practices.

The next vignettes occurred after the mid-term examinations and recess, with the addition of new titles and after some practice of reading clubs. This vignette focuses on the Contagious Kids.

### **6.3.3 Discussion as effort: the Contagious Kids on *The boy who was afraid***

In the Tigers' discussion the learners made an effort to include each other and participate to some extent in the discussion. That learners listened to each other was evident in their taking up of each other's comments and echoing what was said in order to dialogically construct meaning. In contrast, the following transcript from the Contagious Kids (Jackie, Jude and Tessa) on *The Boy who was Afraid*, has different group dynamics. In an earlier book discussion, Jackie had dominated the conversation enthusiastically but in so doing excluded the other members, so I asked Jackie on this occasion to ensure that everyone had a chance to speak.

Jackie: Ok. Ok. Jude, how was the book for you? How was the book like for you?

Jude: Boring.

Jackie: Sorry?

Jude: Boring.

Jackie: How was the book like for you? (*to Tessa*)

Tessa: Lekker<sup>13</sup>. Adventurous

Jackie: The book was for me very exciting and interesting, espec... (*changes her mind*) What, what was your favourite part of the book though it was boring (*to Jude*)?

Jackie had recently re-discovered her interest in reading books and here goes through the motions of asking her group questions so as to elicit their viewpoints. She employs the question and answer format modelled at school and avoids engaging in the answers offered. She does not entertain the 'discourse of the boring book' on the Five Conceited Kids draw as will be seen later, but instead exercises her agency to ask about 'favourite parts'. This dialogic turn, reflects a reader-response disposition, and allows her group members to connect differently with the

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<sup>13</sup> Lekker is Afrikaans for 'sweet' or in this case good or great. It is often used colloquially in English to signify approval or enjoyment

book and as a group, though their answers seem summative rather than exploratory. The responses about 'favourite parts' follows a similar pattern to 'How do you like the book?'

Jude: The part when he travelled over the ocean with the dog.

Jackie: And yours? Tess?

Tess: What?

Jackie: What was your favourite part of the book?

Tess: Was the part, ja when he was on the other side of that ocean and he killed different kinds of stuff for food.

Jackie: Ja mine was where he made that cone thing, that boat thingie and where he killed the boar for the teeth, ja, and where he went home.

Jackie: So do you think, umm (*whispering*) What's his name?

Tess: Mafatu...

Jackie: Mafatu was brave or was he still afraid at the end?

Jude: He was brave

Jackie: Why do you say he was brave?

Jude: Because he overcome his fear

Jackie: And you? Do you think he was brave?

Tess: Brave

Jackie: So ja I also think he think he was brave he overcomed his fear. He was the brave boy not the fear boy so that's what we think about the book and how we feel about the book so bye

Tess: Bye.

Jackie's understanding of discussing books seems to be based on providing succinct answers to the prescribed questions. She is probably drawing on her experiences of school practices where one-word or one-sentence responses are required on worksheets without any real development of thought or justification for a response being required. That her group members go along with this supports the possibility that for them too, this concise answering of questions was the practice they were all familiar with. So they were drawing on familiar discourses and structures at the level of the Real to effect the emergence of these practices. Opening up other spaces and possibilities, as in the reading club, does not mean that learners will take up agency

to engage differently to probe or extend their initial responses. Patterns of engagement that are preferred in school contexts have been established and learners discipline themselves in following the school practices, even without the teacher present (Dixon, 2011) to monitor talk, or the structured worksheet to guide answers. As Dixon found with grade 1 learners, schooling discipline patterns established by teachers are taken up and perpetuated by learners themselves, so by grade 8 as in this study, discourse patterns are established as part of some learners' habitus. In terms of their use of talk, this group's lack of any real engagement or any attempt to understand each other's perspective results in little evidence of the dialogic spark noted in the Tiger's discussion above. While their talk does not devolve into what Wegerif and Mercer (1997) term *disruptive* talk, they also cannot be seen to be building on knowledge cumulatively. Their only point of concord is that Mafatu is "the brave boy not the fear boy" which as the 'correct' answer, in school-based Discourse terms, means 'their work is finished'. Thus socio-cultural conditioning means they continue to draw on established school-based positions prevents them from exercising agency to draw on alternative ideological positions constructing appropriate ways of behaving in the space of the reading club.

What does emerge through Jackie's choice of questions is the 'personal response' discourse rather than the official 'discourse of the book', which was the framework given to guide group discussions. Jackie has drawn on a practice of 'booktalk' based on a personal enjoyment, which her group responds to though, ironically, it does not result in engaged talk. It would seem as if there is a disjuncture between a 'personal response' discourse, and school dispositions towards short answers and 'completing the work'.

In the next vignette the Cool Cats' discuss *Seedfolks*<sup>14</sup>, a new addition to the reading clubs.

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<sup>14</sup> Through gradual participation in an informal reclaiming of a neighbourhood plot in Cleveland, strangers engage in a communal activity of developing a garden. This process is told by the 16 different characters from a variety of different backgrounds.

### 6.3.4 Discussion as engagement: the Cool Cats on *Seedfolks*

As indicated in Table 6.2 earlier, the Cool Cats' recording was significantly longer than other groups. It is their first discussion that I will focus on here.

The Cool Cats had mixed reactions to this book which emerged as they were initially led through their discussions by Patricia, or Pat. She starts with a conventional question which poses an immediate challenge as the book is divided into sixteen chapters each focusing on a different character in the community. So, in this case, the variety of characters disrupts their expectations of following a 'main character' and their thinking needs to be adjusted. Pat focuses the group on this challenge from the outset as she enacts the teacher's role as authoritative and controlling in asking questions:

Patricia: We read the *Seedfolks*. I'm Patricia and I'm asking, who was the main character?

Bonny: Right now we don't have any idea as there's a lot of different characters in the book.

Nela: I think it's Kim

Manyano: Why Kim?

Nela: Because, she's the one who got the first idea about the garden and stuff.

Pat: Manyano?

Manyano: I think it's Kim

Pat: Adam?

Adam: I also think it's Kim

Pat: Ok. so..

Nela: Who do you think it is?

Pat: Kim. So who is this Kim?

Bonny: Kim is this other Asian or Chinese girl who lost her father and she could garden exactly like her father, when she ...

Bonny's answer is a valid interpretation in that each chapter gives a different character's views on the neighbourhood and developing of a community garden. In the teacher's role, Pat elicits answers and then attempts to build a cumulative understanding by exploring Kim's role further by getting 'buy-in' for her summary of

Kim. She has eschewed her seeming authoritarian stance for probing understandings.

Pat: So, she's fatherless ...

Nela: Mmmhmm

Pat: She's a teenage girl ...

Nela: Mmmhmm

Pat: And she's in a mission ...

Bonny: Mmhuh?

Pat: I think she in a mission to find out who she is...

Bonny: Ja,

Nela: And you Manyano, what do you think?

Manyano: Ja ja ja

Pat: Of course, she's a teenager, every teenager goes through a phase where they want to know who they are, and they want to know who they want to be like.

Bonny: Ja.

Pat: So I think...

Bonny: I also agree on that.

Here Pat draws on the discourse of 'troubled teens' searching for meaning and a sense of identity and explains Kim's actions of trying to connect with a lost father, in a foreign land in these terms. This discourse is one her group recognises and her points seem to resonate with them. Although it would seem that she could elaborate on this discourse she hesitates, and then introduces new questions for the group to consider, starting with the setting.

Pat: So where was the setting?

Manyano: It's Cleveland.

Nela: In America.

Manyano: I think it's America.

Pat: Ok, so is it rural, urban?

Bonny: I want to say it's, urban.

Nela: Ja

Pat: Urban ja. ok what kind of urban then?

Bonny: There's flats, apartments and it includes farming.

Pat: Farming, Ok. So, the other characters, how do you feel about the book?

Bonny: It's not the kind of a book I would read though

Manyano: Definitely not. Yoh!

Pat: I think this book.... So what do you think of the title, the title, Seedfolks?

Adam: Seedfolks.

Bonny: Seedfolks.

Nela: Like when you hear the name what do you think?

Pat: Ja, what do you think in your mind when you?

Manyano: I think I hear Ubuntu

Bonny: I hear farming when I hear the word seed I hear farming. And when I look at the cover and the pictures.

Nela: Mmmhmm

Bonny: Folks. It's about digging I think

Pat: Digging

Bonny: Folks. Seed Folks

Pat: Ok, so I think.... do you think the title relates to the book?

Bonne: Yes I do.

Adam & Manyano: Ja.

Nela: It does. Definitely yes.

Although all groups used a question and answer technique in their discussion groups, Pat's questions here point to a deeper conceptual understanding of this novel. From the outset she has used the familiar questions as a starting point to making connections within the story. Her approach is gentle, probing and insightful that gradually draws the group into a deeper understanding of the relevance of the story's structure. She has held back, with some difficulty, from sharing her own interpretations but instead has skilfully guided her group's understanding. Like Jackie in the Contagious Kids, she has really enjoyed the assigned book, but unlike Jackie, she uses her group's answers to pose further questions that challenge deeper thinking. Both conversations touch on the title but while Pat invites her group to consider its relevance, Jackie sums up their book with "He was the brave boy not the

fear boy". Her group never considers the relevance of the title with its focus on fear rather than bravery though it would seem that Jackie herself is aware of this significance but chooses rather to end the conversation than to explore further. Pat takes up the cultural categories for reading club discussion, such as *character* and *setting* (i.e. she draws on what I have termed 'the discourse of the book') and uses these instead to open a discussion rather than closing it down. Her adoption of an engaged probing reading club practice allows her group to use more exploratory talk (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997) to reach shared dialogic understandings (Bakhtin, 1981). She draws on discourses which are familiar to all, like the troubled teens but ignores confusion between farming and gardening in a city as the discourse of 'gardening' as a hobby is probably not within her experience at this stage. She then proceeds with further questions of her own that allow group members to make their own connections with the story. She has exercised agency to draw on familiar discourses (the 'troubled teens') and avoid the unfamiliar (gardening). Within the reading club structure, she has also drawn on the discourse of booktalk to ask her group to refine their answers and thereby provide textual evidence to support their responses. Through this negotiation she assists them in acquiring dominant school Discourses which require textual evidence to support claims.

In the next excerpt she encourages a reader-response (Rosenblatt) orientation.

Pat: So, umm what's the most umm, precious, umm, moment of the story?

Bonny: Ok, It's when this other guy, I've forgot his name. It was like, umm, when he planted umm ...

Man: Tomatoes.

Bonny: Tomatoes to get back his girlfriend.

Adam: That was really ...

Pat: Romantic.

Nela: Sweet, romantic ha ha ha

Bonny: It's romantic

*(Laughs)*

Bonny: I think his name was Chokka or something.

Pat: Ja. Ok. And, umm, what is the most saddest thing?

Bonny: When Kim lost her father, obviously.

Nela: And the second part was, umm, when the lettuce died because of the sun.

Manyano: Ja. That was one.

Adam: Ja

Asking about 'precious' and 'saddest' moments are unusual requests and indicate both the poignancy of the story and Pat's sensitivity to it. Here Pat has deviated from the proffered reading club script to engage with issues of particular relevance to this text. She has used the space of the reading club and her own agency to focus on value issues in the cultural domain as to what is 'precious' or 'sad'. Again Pat's questions reflect her insight into the novel as there were no clear-cut answers to either question. In fact points could have been made for virtually any other character's story as precious or sad but learners here are given agency to direct their own understanding and response. The Cool Cats as a group have, in this discussion, avoided the dominant practice of a 'correct' answer and seem open to different understandings backed by evidence from the text. In their agency they have taken up a reader-response position (Rosenblatt, 1978) to draw on evidence from the text that resonated with each individual. Their discussion continues with Pat asking relevant questions and then, as she did earlier with the main character Kim, trying to pull together an understanding of the novel for herself and the group.

Pat: Mmm. And the book in itself ? Do you think, do you think umm ... Who were the target audience of this, story?

Bonny: Umm. Definitely definitely Kim, coz she's the one who started.

Pat: No the target. Who something was, who was inclined to read it?

Man: I think it's our grandparents.

*(Laughter)*

Pat: No. Because the author, the author writes teenage books. And I think this one is a teenage book because first of all, he started with Kim.

Nela: Mmmm ...

Pat: So obviously it must be a teenage book, and the umm, interesting thing is that he added, he added old people so like it started from young to old. So it shows, then ...

Nela: Ja, I get you, I get you.

Pat: But what I think about the book, I think this whole book. How I summarise it, it's about a community full of insolation and stereotypes.

Nela: Mmmhmm ...

Pat: And it's about farming, and it's a community that does not talk to each other. This community is diverse and has foreigners from other countries, but finally what I like is that the Ubuntu comes back and everybody starts talking to each other and they really paint an important role of what is a community.

Nela: Can I ask you something?

Pat: And everyone kind of forgets their differences and comes back together united.

Nela: Can I ask you something?

Pat exercises her agency in challenging her group to think about the 'target audience'. She is stepping outside of the novel and alerting the group to an author figure lurking in the wings and directing the unfolding story. The concept of a target audience had not been stressed in whole class discussions and suggests that Pat is drawing on a more critical orientation, in line with Freebody and Luke's (1990) concept of critical competence. 'Target audience' is associated more with marketing and advertising and if, as Linda and Jackie claim, as mentioned earlier, primary school reading fare consists largely of magazines and shorter texts, then the 'target audience' of consumer-type texts, may be what she is drawing on here. If so, she has used the reading club structure to draw on co-existing discourses to enact a hybrid re-contextualization (Freebody & Luke, 1990). They suggest redesign and hybridization require breadth in an individual's "repertoire of literate practices" (Luke & Freebody, 1992: 4). Pat indicates breadth in her repertoires (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) when she exercises her agency to claim that this author writes teenage novels. Her awareness of the authorial figure extends beyond an isolated text, like *Seedfolks*, to an author's oeuvre, though she would not use that term. She recognises that authors write 'types of books' and so categorises this novel as a teenage novel. This enables Nela, later in their recording, to verbalise her appreciation for this book as she too likes 'teenage' books. Thus Pat's repertoire is shared and extended with her group.

She suggests the community is full of 'insolation and stereotypes' and recognises the isolation of the individuals in their diversity, and in so doing touches on the

discourses of modernity. She brings a particularly South African take to the discussion with her use of 'foreigners from other countries', as *foreignness* is often part of the unfortunate xenophobic discourse that identifies people as 'the other'. Within the context of *Seedfolks'* Cleveland setting, *immigrants* might have been a more apt term suggesting people who have moved there to settle but this understanding is not ascribed to Africans, or Chinese or Pakistanis, who move to South Africa to make a living. They are seen as foreigners who have another country as a home. Pat uses the available prevalent South African discourse but ameliorates it with her reference to Ubuntu as the overriding value recognising the unity of humanity over difference.

Pat's comments here draw on two competing discourses current in South Africa, namely difference or 'foreignness' and Ubuntu or unity. What seems to resonate with Pat, is that the idealism of Ubuntu is realized in this community, in contrast to the xenophobic incidents that are seen in South Africa. The use of the term 'foreigners' is emotive and pejorative but Pat does not seem to have a less discriminatory term available, again reflective of the dominance of this discourse in society and for literature as a means of expanding ideas of difference and couching these differently in a new discourse.

While Pat recognises the differences in the *Seedfolks* community she also attributes this as part of the reconciliation of difference.

Nela: What brought them together? The garden ...

Pat : I think what brought them together, it was the garden, and also that, umm, there was umm, these Mexican guys, coz Mexicans like to party you know, so these Mexican guys went to this house of this Mexican guy and kind of started, like you know, a gathering like, a get-together and they were having fun so others kind of like, wanted to go there, so they took what they had and they went there, and they just, that's where ...

Nela: Came together

Pat: And, happy ending and I think I love the book.

Bonny: Haha I don't like it

Pat: The more I talk about it, it inspires me

While Pat's understanding of foreigners and Ubuntu can be recognised as common discursive constructions in South Africa, her perception of Mexicans as people who like to party is not. She focuses on an incident she saw as pivotal in bringing this diverse community together – an informal get-together that consolidated the casual relationships that had developed in the garden. Her enthusiasm spills over in her realization that she loves this book and that it inspires her. She has also realized that she has come to this awareness through talking about the book and that through talk she has developed a greater insight and appreciation. Bonny's clear-cut 'I don't like it' is ignored in this wave of enthusiasm.

Nela: Ok. When you first read the book, guys, guys when you first read the book, like first pages, what did you think? Was this book boring or interesting?

Pat: I think it, Ok, talk Adam

Adam: It was interesting, the first part, but in the middle (*laughs*).

Manyano: Ja, confusing.

Adam: You kind of get lost.

Bonny: I think all these characters have different stories.

Nela: Mmm

Pat: But you know what, you know one thing is, they're linked, even though they seem different they all come together in one umm, topic. So, I think, also the old people talk about how they came in the, and how the area was like and the young people tell their stories about their daily lives, so... Did it come into your mind? What did you learn about the book?

(*Pause*)

Manyano: It's never lose Ubuntu

Pat: Ja, and?

Nela: You are the same no matter what ... how

Manyano: How different you are.

Nela: How do I say this?

Pat: You're the same, it doesn't matter about ...

Nela: About your cultures.

Pat: Ja, it doesn't matter how different you are, first of all you are a human being, then become ...

Nela: We're all made by the same person

Bonny: Ja. Our holy Creator.

Nela draws on school practices of questioning as she modifies a thought-provoking, open-ended question to an 'either or' option, 'boring' or 'interesting' without the possibility of both. The discourse of the 'boring' book seems to be a default position and speaks back to the limited discourses available to the learners. It also seems at odds with the more nuanced, open questions and personal responses elicited by Pat. Nela's use of the 'boring' or 'interesting' options constrains the responses of the group who struggle with these limited options so that Adam, whose voice has not been heard as much, takes up the 'interesting' book position but admits he is lost for words as his reading progressed. Nela's move to simplify an open question by presenting a choice of two options does not enable responses. In order to reduce the writing demands on learners, short-answer or multiple choice type questions have become a common educational practice, especially in attempts to standardize large-scale assessments like ANAs and PIRLS. For teachers concerned with getting marks, this practice is attractive. While Nela's use of the binary option is therefore in line with local and national assessment trends, here it indicates how constraining, this mechanism is in relation to the interplay of agency and culture. Providing a binary does not open up, or develop understandings, especially in this multi-voiced story with parallel views on the relevance of the garden, but is a dominant, 'legitimate' literacy assessment practice.

Pat exercises to draw on reading practices derived from didactic texts: the discourse of 'moral lessons'. 'Reading' of religious texts often focuses on learning a lesson that the text presents as 'true' or fixed which the reader must find so as to be constituted as a successful or 'good reader'. Literary practices of reading religious and moral texts value 'reading' that results in learning lessons or in self-improvement. A concern to sum up the book in a lesson could be seen as reductive: that the book can be summed up in a one-sentence lesson even more so – but at another level it points to the nub of the story and it forms part of conventional 'booktalk'. Because of the extent of Pat's repertoire, this is only one of a variety of discourses she draws on in her questions to the group.

In the last section, the Cool Cats discuss their rating of the book. This was introduced as a mechanism for rounding off their discussion and all having a final

say. Many groups did not include this, and Adam might have skipped it, but the members of the Cool Cats seemed interested in each other's ratings and in understanding the different responses.

Adam: Are we done?

Man: No we're not done.

Pat: No, the rate ...

Nela: Yes I was going to ask that ...

Manyano: I give it 4 out of 10.

Bonny: Haha why 4?

Nela Why 4?

Manyano: Coz it's boring.

Pat: So what kind of books do you like?

Manyano: Action

Pat: Action. Ok. We're all entitled to our own opinions. Mmm What do you think Adam?

Adam: 5.

Nela: Ok. And you?

Bonny: 5.

Nela: And you?

Pat: I think I'll give it a 7.

Manyano: Because you were inspired by the book

Pat: I was inspired by the book

Nela: I'll give it a 6 because I love teenage books because the things that we face ...

Pat: Are in there.

Nela: Ja, are in there, like. Ja. It's kind of nice, it's kind of cool.

Bonny: Cool.

Manyano: It's kind of nice, not cool.

Adam: (*Whispering*) Are we done?

Man: No, we're not done

(*Laughs*)

Bonny: Cut!

Pat: This is the ...

Bonny: Cool cats ...

Nela: Cool cats signing off!

What is significant about this group's discussion was the level of open engagement and honesty. This was partly due to the types of questions which allowed for different preferences and responses, as opposed to the often closed questions required in worksheets. Here we see learners exercising agency to draw on structures (the reading clubs) and cultural resources (including discourses constructing books, readers and reading) which emerge in reading club events at the Actual. The reading club structure allows any member to lead the discussion and here we see an example of a learner, Pat, with a breadth and depth of literate practices (Luke & Freebody, 1992) drawing on her repertoire to facilitate her group's developing of these practices. The immediacy of the discussion group meant that different voices were heard and responded to as the utterances built cumulatively on each other. In this reading club discussion no-one needed to 'mushfake' – as Linda had done with me in the library – as there was not as much at stake in maintaining face. Nor did learners have to feign appreciation of the book to please or impress the teacher figure – as Linda had done. Instead learners have the space to own their responses, draw on relevant literacy discourses and practices, and agree or disagree, as young adults, while still deepening their understanding of the book.

Reading clubs as structures allowed learners to exercise their agency and draw on different discursively constituted ways of responding to a book. As such, structurally reading clubs were sites for the *acquisition* (Gee, 1996) of a reading identity via "informal apprentice-style learning" (Bartlett, 2005: 2) within a supportive 'safe space'. The use of worksheets would have invoked particular literacy practices and Discourses, encompassing a focus on the 'correct answer' or being the first to complete the worksheet. Instead we see learners, especially Pat, exercise their agency to draw on multiple discourses thereby encouraging her group to think about this book in new and novel ways. This is not overt instruction in 'how to read the text' nor does it offer the final word on what the text 'means'. Instead it is "active apprenticeship in academic social practices" (Gee, 1996: 147). Equally important in the vignette of the Cool Cats is that through the dialogic process of expressing and

assessing different understandings, each individual's appreciation of the text was enhanced. For Pat, it was the process of engagement in a group and the agency to draw on multiple literacies, which encouraged her to frame her understanding in terms of 'the more I talk about it the more it inspires me'.

### **6.3.5 Discussion as radio broadcast – presented by the *Five Conceited Kids***

In contrast to the 'teacherly' roles and efforts to sustain the discussion displayed by the Tigers in their first recorded reading club discussion and the repertoire of discourses drawn on by the Cool Cats, the Five Conceited Kids approached their first recording quite differently. They had discussed two books before this recording occurred: these discussions had given them practice time in 'booktalk'. However, the novel they discuss in this extract was not enjoyed as much as previous titles and being recorded impacted on their discussions.

Their ownership of the recording possibility is prefaced by my initial questions where, in an effort to inculcate school literary discourse, I ask them to move from vague generalizations to specific evidence for their assessments, with limited success, as will be seen. My questions also encourage more specific answers, even if details, such as the cover are immediately visible to all. Here is the initial phase of their group's discussion.

ES: So you say you weren't very enthusiastic about the book, why not?

Litha: The cover isn't very interesting and ... umm, it's about detectives so we're not really aware about those kinds of stories.

ES: You say the cover is not very exciting, what was on the cover?

Toni: It is...

Litha: A creamish colour, and ...

Toni: The colours and the title, it's ....

ES: Okay so the colours weren't very, so there wasn't very much colour.

Nandipha: It's a plain jacket.

ES: Ok . And then the title?

Toni: The title is just.....

ES: Shhuush (*to another group, and ES leaves the Five Conceited Kids*).

My departure clearly opened the space for talk to move in another direction:

Noli: I'm Noluthando...

Litha: My name is Sweetness!

Toni: I'm Toni, ah ha ha ...

Noli: Noluthando aka Nicki ...

Litha: Sweetness aka Noli ...

Toni: Toni aka Dwenz ... mwah

Litha: Ciao

Noli: We are the YGOC,

Toni: The Conceited Kids,

Litha: Grade 8c ha ha ha (*Giggles*)

The presence of a device (which can be conceptualized as an ICT-related structure in Bhaskarian terms) to record their conversation, results in these sing-song 'radio' introductions accompanied by much giggling. My absence allows them to take up agency in a way which would not be possible had I stayed with the group. They then draw on the presence of the recording device and associated popular discourses to effect an 'alternative' identity to the one I was hoping to foster: that of radio 'DJ's and musicians. This would seem to be a strong influence in their lives as they can 'switch on' quite readily – in fact they hardly miss a beat as the recording shows. Three of the four girls introduce themselves by nicknames, and then amplify these in the second round with 'aka'. This is achieved smoothly and efficiently as befits radio 'DJs'. Whether the fourth girl would have had her introduction is not known as the focus changed briefly with my return. The slick exchanges and repartee indicate that learners are active members of a 'DJ' Discourse. The identities enacted here compete with a possible 'reading' identity as they draw on alternative discourses from the level of culture to instead assert a 'DJ' or 'radio' Discourse.

My return prompts a shift in behaviour:

ES: (*Returns*) And then I want you to tell me about where it's set, what was interesting about the setting and what was not nice about the setting?

Toni & Nandipha: Ok. (*ES leaves*).

Toni: The story was set in South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Litha: Just keep the story, let's just have fun about here.

*(Giggles)*

Toni: The story, guys. The story was set in Johannesburg, South Africa. Oh my word!

Litha: City of Gold.

*(Giggles)*

Toni: The story ...

*(Giggles)*

Noli: It's boring. It's so boring ...

*(Giggles)*

Toni: It's, it's boring ...

*(Giggles)*

Noli: It's totally, totally boring ...

Nandipha: And, there's only one thing that he was...

Noli: It's actually whack hey.

*(Giggles)*

Toni: No man, no, no, no.

*(Giggles)*

Noli: Hey guy! Was it nice chilling with the YGOC girls?

Here the girls seem to suspend their radio positions and Toni exercises her agency to focus the group on the setting, thus drawing on 'the discourse of the book'. Litha then exercises her agency in pursuit of 'fun' by drawing on popular Discourses even though my return prompted them to return to 'booktalk'. In doing so she reinforces notions, expressed by many teachers, that learners 'just play' when they have group work to do. Two competing 'ways of being' are drawn on in this reading club event: the new Discourse encompassing 'booktalk' or another encompassing 'having fun'. The latter was probably learners' practice in other group situations and is stated quite clearly as a legitimate – despite being recorded – possibility. In terms of discussing books, as a group these learners share a common discourse of the 'boring' book, which seems to limit any further analysis and insight. The label 'boring' is unmediated and irredeemable and works to close off exploratory talk. It is almost

as if the final word has been said so nothing can be ventured to mitigate this 'boringness'.

The girls' discussion continues but still with little literary substance though plenty of participation.

Toni: This story was totally not it. It was not for the youth; maybe it was for the older generation but not for us.

Litha: But Mrs Scheckle picked the story. Oh my gosh, it was so boring.

*(Giggles)*

Litha: Penny, Penny, Penny ...

Nandipha: Pen, Pen, Pen ...

Noli: K'tching K'tching

Nandipha: Royalty mwah

Litha: Amina mariqwa morea mariqwa

Toni tries to specify the book's lack of appeal by stating that it would be enjoyed more by older people rather than young people. She invokes her position as belonging to the 'youth' who value types of books different to ones set in the 1920s or to detective books, which are clearly for older people. The group shares a similar Discourse drawing on 'youth' culture with the move from Penny, as the main character to 'penny' as a monetary unit. They build on this shared understanding and cumulative talk to resist engagement with booktalk. The use of 'k'tching' as a cash register noise and 'mwah' as air kisses, also mark their positions as members of the 'youth'. In drawing on such lexis and practices, they strongly construct themselves as the 'youth' with their own insider knowledge as members of this Discourse.

Toni: Okay. Back to square one. The setting. Oh my word, it is just South Africa, our city, and it was in the city of gold and back then it was an in, in in in... [*Giggling*] industrial city, in... in ... in ... industrial city. Yo!

Noli : The story tell us about a girl, Penny, who is, searching for her father.

Litha: Yes, she's searching about her father's death and umm, she's going round asking people who worked with her father. Well the story is very boring, you know. I could watch TV than read this story.

Toni: A girl looking for her father, Why did her father leave her? Oh my word.

Nandipha: No, the father died.

Toni: Oh, ok now that girl went looking for her father.

Litha: And that's a very huge problem.

Nandipha: Umm, and you know what doesn't ...

While Toni is clearly a member of the 'youth', she also exercises her agency to start a discussion about the book in asking about Penny's father. For Toni her 'youth' identity has clearly been established so she can now 'try on' a 'reader' identity by asking questions about things that confuse her. Demonstrations of membership of a 'youth' identity are discouraged within school structures which 'summon' learners to take up schooled positions and schooling-related Discourses. In this reading club event, learners establish existing identities and experiment with new ones in an ongoing process. Litha's actions of 'reading' versus watching television, presents a clear image of these opposing Discourses competing for her time as they co-exist in her practice. Ideally reading clubs were sites for learners to add to their repertoire of Discourses in an additive rather than subtractive understanding which Toni attempts here. Although her question reveals that she has not read the full story, she is willing to share her uncertainty with the group. Nandipha, who did not participate as actively as the others in asserting her membership of the 'youth' culture now addresses Toni's confusion. While Nandipha has a clear affinity with the 'youth' identity, by virtue of her membership of this group, her lack of voice in establishing this position within the classroom context could speak to schooling structures in conditioning appropriate learner behaviour and also to a stronger affinity with a 'reading' identity. Instead of participating in the 'youth' Discourse here she tentatively uses the technical language of 'booktalk' in her reference to the 'jacket' as opposed to a 'cover' to signal her affiliation and membership of a bookish Discourse.

When learners encounter a book (an event at the level of the Actual) their experience of that book emerges from structures and mechanisms at the level of the Real. The 'boring' discourse is one mechanism. Social structures, where learners encounter 'soapies' and popular culture, is another. Besides the possibility of limited discourse practices and the dominance of popular culture, marginalized youth might resist the Discourse positions offered at schools, as was the case with the youth in Willis' (1977) study, and may have a greater affinity for popular culture. Moje (2000) points to adolescents' engagement with popular culture and 'gangsta' literacy

practices as attempts to be 'part of the story'. Her study suggests that those who do not have access to the dominant culture, by virtue of class, race or ethnicity, participate in these practices "as a way of writing themselves into the world" (2000: 652).

A month or so after the *My father and I* discussion, the group were recorded discussing a different title, *Don't tell me what to do*. Again we see Litha initiating the discussion, the uses of aliases like 'Sweetness' and 'Senorita Maraja', and recourse to the 'DJ Discourse'. Here is an excerpt from the first recording of their discussions on this text.

Litha: Okay guys, Sweetness here and I'll be asking the questions for today. So Mickey who's the character?

Noli: The main character is Tom.

Litha: Oooh Toni, Toni, Toni.

Nandipha: You know Toni, she always wants to talk. Always wants to.

Litha: You know Toni always wants to talk. Toni, just tell me anything about the book. Anything inspiring?

Toni: Okay guys this is Toni, the optimal kid and I'll be telling you about the book. The book was very interesting, it was nice, enthusing, everything was great.

Litha: Okay Toni that's enough, we're handing it to Vusi. Vusi, Vusi, what's your take on the book?

Vusi: This is me, bling guy. I'll be answering the questions. The book umm, is very interesting. I like it, I like Tom, he's a very straight-forward person. That's what I've got to say about it.

Litha introduces herself as 'Sweetness' and claims the interviewer role of "asking the questions". The group accepts her authority in this as they take up other positions. For example Toni is referred to as one who 'likes to talk' and she takes up this ascribed role in being quite vocal in all three recordings on this book. In invoking her 'radio' persona, 'the optimal kid', Toni takes up her membership of the 'DJ Discourse' while simultaneously taking up the Discourse of the reading club. For her, this 'new' identity can co-exist alongside her 'radio' persona but she uses the latter to preface her book talk. Her Discourse positions are not in competition, which speaks to Gee's (2008) contention that identities are multiple and evolving. When Vusi, the only male,

is called to speak, he subscribes to the DJ Discourse by drawing on the notion of an 'alias' and introduces himself as the 'bling guy' which seems ironic in the school culture which forbids any 'bling' so possibly this moniker is aspirational or is part of the 'gold-chained', ear-ringed 'DJ' image.

This group then exercises agency to draw heavily on popular discourses at the level of the Real as shown in the excerpt below.

Litha: Zanoxolo? Nandipha, Seniorita Maraja?

Mumbling & laughing

Toni: Ok, Seniorita Maraja is eating now so she can't really answer. Ok now I'll be answering the questions. The optimal kid

Nandipha: Ok that's over, we're going to sing you a song, 'German Revenge'<sup>15</sup> by Nicki Minaj featuring Eminem. Hit it baby!

*(Mumbling & laughing)*

Noli: [*Rapping voice and rhythm*] I am not Jasmine, I am Aladdin. So far ahead these bums is laggin', See me in that new thing bums is gaggin', I'm start to feel like a dungeon dragon, Raah raah like a dungeon dragon, I'm start to feel like a dungeon dragon.

Litha: Ok, seniorita that's enough, you may sing around with us.

Nandipha: Ohh, seniorita uh uh your voice doesn't sound like you

Toni: Guys can you believe it, Tom went for a job but guess what, he fell in love with Master's girl.

Nandipha: She's so ugly man.

Litha: She's a nice chick.

Nandipha: But no man, She's, she's very bossy, always, you know, like.

Toni: She always wants to kiss him,

Noli: She's so horny. Oh gosh!

*Laughing & group converses in Xhosa for the next 30 seconds, the remainder of the recording*

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<sup>15</sup> The title is actually Roman's Revenge. The lyrics were not clear from the tape so I have included the original lyrics from the Nicky Minaj song available at

<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/nickiminaj/romansrevenge.html>

Litha continues to enact the role of the questioner in calling on group members to speak. Noli and Nandipha, who are afforded the opportunity to share book responses, exercise their agency, and the space afforded within the reading club culture, to engage in more explicit radio practice as Nandipha introduces a singer, Nicky Minaj (Noli's alias), with the phrase 'hit it baby'. Noli clearly identifies with her radio personality, Nicky Minaj<sup>16</sup> and raps the first few lines from 'Roman's Revenge' which was released as part of Minaj's debut album, *Pink Friday* in late 2010. Although Litha and Toni, allow this alternative practice, they both take up reading club practices in directing the group's attention back to the book. This excerpt ends with the group acting as a collective to censor what I could hear by speaking in isiXhosa and stopping their recording. It would seem that while Toni and Litha had, to some extent, taken up reading club practices without losing their popular culture identities, Noli and Nandipha preferred to use the reading club space, at this point, to engage in radio-related practices. Toni and Litha exercised their agency to draw on reading club structures and the discourse of the book to effect the emergence of reading club practices. Thus far, as a group, they had shared common discourse practices and the pause in their recording allowed them space to negotiate their collective reading club practice.

How can we understand Noli's performance of *Dungeon Dragon*? She has exercised her agency to draw on a cultural artefact, a current popular song, in her rap performance. Bartlett's (2005: 3) research recognises the role of cultural artefacts in "improvisational identity work". She suggests that compelling cultural resources are adopted "to counteract powerful social positioning" (*ibid*: 3). The figured world of rap and radio (as a cultural resource at the level of the Real) and the assumed roles allow them to practise "emerging senses of powerful selves" (*ibid*: 5) in reading club events (at the level of the Actual). Dyson suggests that in taking on the language of media or song, children re-voice or re-accent them and in so doing "form a sense of their own agency, their own possibilities for action, as they slip into the voices that organise their social worlds" (Dyson, 2003: 331). However, Noli does not use the

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<sup>16</sup> Nicki Minaj is the stage name of Onka Tanya Maraj, who has an alter-ego, Roman Zolanski who features with Eminem's alter-ego Slim Shady. In these extracts, Noli is referred to as Nicky Minaj while Nandipha, is referred to as Senorita Maraja.

song to mediate or re-contextualize her understanding of the book, but instead has exercised agency to engage in a performance during the reading club event.

This group's engagement with what I have termed 'DJ Discourse' is even more marked in this extract, culminating in the performance of a song, albeit curtailed. Possibilities of being recorded and playing to an audience, even a solitary one like me, may have encouraged this. It would seem that these learners are following the behaviour of their idols, Nicki Minaj and Eminem, in taking up alternative names for public performances. Through this public face they can experiment with alternative possibilities rarely afforded in a language classroom, of performing rap. While DJ and specifically rap Discourses are arguably more readily available and more popular than others which encompass engagement with books, here the two compete within the group's recording. So the structure of the reading club provides for the emergence of different kinds of behaviour (practices at the level of the Actual), even that of rap. The resilience of popular discourse here, constrains the emergence of a reader identity, especially with respect to Noli and Nandipha, although Litha and Toni seem to draw on both possibilities.

My analysis tracks the group through two more discussions of *Don't tell me what to do*. In this recording, Toni attempts to get her peers to focus on the book, while still engaging with 'DJ Discourse'. In doing this she re-establishes her persona as the 'optimal kid'.

Noli: We are the Five Conceited Kids

Toni: Hello guys these are the Five Conceited Kids. I'll be telling you about the story, what happened and so on and so forth. There was a guy named Tom. Well, this is the optimal kid telling you this, Toni Puti, the optimal kid, haha. There was a guy named Tom, he ran away from home, he stopped a car and ja, the man let him in, the man offered him a job, ja he fell in love with a girl. Someone will tell you detail to detail. Let's hand it over to Nicki Minaj. Ok, she doesn't want to talk so we'll go to the Seniorita Maraja.

Nandipha: Okay, I'd like to ask Vusi what was your favourite part of the story?

Vusi: My favourite part of the story was when Masters asks Tom to umm ...

Nandipha: It's me Seniorita Maraja asking that, hey

Vusi: Oh man these girls make me crazy! As I was saying that, what I liked about the story is that Masters asked Tom to collect the drugs and Tom tried to... You understand what I'm saying?

Litha: Okay Vusi, that's enough. It was a bit snooty because he was asked to move into this million dollar house. Well it's kind of snooty doing that to someone. It actually means he wanted something in return so, ja, the book was very interesting. Ja, I enjoyed it much. So we're handing it over to Nicki Minaj, she hasn't said a thing

Noli: Ask me a question

Toni: Okay, the optimal child wants to ask Nicki Minaj a question. Nicki, what was the most interesting part of the story?

Nicki: My interesting part of the story was when Masters handed over his daughter, Shirley, to go out on a date with Tom but that date wasn't very romantic and stuff.

Toni: Because they went to a pub. I mean the first date to a pub, no man.

Litha: So not ayoba!

Nandipha: This is Senorita Moraja. So tell me now, how's the story's ending?

Noli: The story's ending?

Toni: Ok the optimal kid will answer that. The Masters died in the big thingamajig that happened down there. He couldn't breathe any longer. Tom and Shirley, Shirley's the Masters' daughter. Tom and Shirley ended, I don't know what, but they just fell in love.

Nandipha: But then tell me now, how did Masters die?

Toni: He couldn't breathe any longer, he was too fat.

Litha: Okay guys I think that's a wrap. I think that's a wrap, guys. We had fun doing this Mrs. Scheckle, thank you for such a great opportunity.

Although Litha would like to run this group's discussion and uses language to signal this control, it would seem as if Toni is more familiar with the content of the book and is willing to involve group members by asking inviting questions to encourage personal responses. She is also confident in answering questions others may have and thus clear up any confusion. Litha draws on her identity as a group leader to declare the discussion closed and in so doing ignores the conversations about the book. Her group ignores her closing statement and Toni continues the discussion as follows:

Toni: And guess what the diamonds were. They were cocaine guys.

Litha: Oh my gosh

Nandipha: Oh my word, do you mean drugs?

Toni: Yes they were drugs but he said they were diamonds.

Nandipha: So was he just fooling around?

Vusi: Hey Nicki, I have a question for you.

Nandipha: Did Tom know they weren't diamonds?

Toni: No, Tom never knew because he said it was diamonds.

Litha: Who would've guessed?

Toni: Yes, Masters knew that it was diamonds. They all thought that it was cocaine but he lied to Tom because he wanted him ...

Noli: To do the job for him

Toni: Ja to do the job for him, whilst he thought that it was cocaine.

Nandipha: This is so interesting you know, very interesting.

Litha: Guys, um, just a piece of advice, never take luxury goods from anyone. You see what it turns out to be. You'll go to jail for cocaine for drugs and all those kind of stuff.

Here Toni seems familiar with the plot and shares some of the twists which others in the group seem to have missed as both Nandipha and Litha seem intrigued by her revelation. She takes up agency to share content, which may be familiar given the prevalence of crime and drugs in the South African context, and while she ignores the reading club focus on character and setting, she makes 'real-life' connections explicit for her group. Both Noli and Nandipha also engage in reading club practices here by asking relevant questions or by supporting Toni with relevant details which Toni takes up, thus affirming her contributions as part of valid reading club Discourse. Litha draws on 'the discourse of the moral lesson' which seems a strong discourse at the level of the Real. As schools regularly use texts for didactic purposes, this is a practice that is familiar. It also echoes the 'moral lessons' of Biblical and other religious texts as seen with the Cool Cats and identified as dominant South African practices by Prinsloo and Breier (1996) and Boughey, (2005). In drawing on this literacy practice, Litha abstracts morals from the story in order for all to learn a life lesson and thus takes the focus away from the complexities of plot or character in this urge to moralize. From a Hallidayan (1994) perspective, *tenor*, as a mechanism at the level of the Real, is being used to

consider all texts as didactic. Understanding the novel is at both the level of the Actual and the Empirical but the understanding emerges from the Real. For Litha the didactic structures at the Real, focus her 'reading' of a text, including a novel, on finding a moral as a guide for life. She maintains this practice throughout the group discussions as is evident in the third discussion on *Don't tell me what to do*, which follows, and in her group's last recorded discussion on *Seedfolks*. From her involvement in the reading clubs at the level of the Actual, Litha seems to have an 'additive' coping response to new practices and Discourses: for her identities of 'leader', 'radio DJ' and 'reader' can coexist and evolve as do her literacy practices as she acts to take up the 'booktalk' of the reading club while simultaneously maintaining her affinity for moral lessons.

The first two discussions of *Don't tell me what to do* by the Five Conceited Kids had ended with comments in isiXhosa and the group seemed to feel the need to record some more. In some ways they seem to be trying to give a good account of their group's understanding of the book by recording a third conversation and addressing the topics that were requested at the outset. It would also seem as if they had discounted the first two recordings and the thoughts shared there. The discussion begins with Litha taking up the discourses introduced as a result of the reading clubs and, of course, her identity as a leader

Litha: Okay guys, here we start again. About the title, the title of the book is *Don't tell me what to do*. It is very stubborn indeed.

Toni: The title was really interesting and my predictions are there was someone, I don't know if it was a boy or girl, that didn't want to be told what to do. Basically that person was really stubborn.

Vusi: That person was Tom. Tom was stubborn for everything. He sacrificed everything that he owned to have what he wanted like a job. Thank you. I'll hand over to Nicki

Noli: Tom left his parents just to be on his own because he didn't want to listen to his father about disciplining him and so when he left he wanted to be on his own. He met someone very nice on his way and took him to his place.

Nandipha: Okay this *Senorita Maraja*. My predications weren't exact as what was based on the story. I predicted it was very interesting, inspiring and full of lessons and so it turned out to be.

Litha: Okay guys, over to the character. As we heard from Toni, Vusi, Noli and Nandipha, the character was very stubborn. Now basically the lesson learnt over here is that being stubborn doesn't help. When your parents discipline you, you should listen. Look, where he was, he found himself hooked onto drugs because now he had to work for some snoopy dude who offered him everything. So it just goes to show, money ain't everything in this kind of world we're living in. So now, as I said, we're handing it over to the character. So Toni will tell us a bit about the character and what it actually meant to her and what she had learnt from this book.

It would seem from this extract that the group had used the hiatus in recording to practice a 'script' of turn-taking and building up responses. The group members are given more time to speak and we can see more extended comments in comparison with earlier transcripts of discussions both of *Don't tell me what to do* and *My father and I*. In this excerpt the comments seem to build on each other more cumulatively as through their shared contributions their understanding grows. Even if this was rehearsed it would seem that there was an idea of what a 'good' reading club discussion would sound like so they have tried to produce this on record. As seen earlier, Litha draws on the strongly held 'discourse of the moral lesson' and sums up everyone's contributions with advice for the group which seems to align with her identity as the group leader, and now also as their life guide. She encourages others to draw on this discourse so we find Toni sharing what she has learnt

Toni: The character. I learnt that whenever my parents tell me what to do, I should do it. When I don't listen then I'm going nowhere and I'm umm ... Never going into expensive cars. Never believe what they say, you don't know what's waiting for you or what's up.

Litha: Wow, that's quite true hey, because these are the issues we face in everyday life. So the other thing is, yes as we said, do not engage in any strange things. If it doesn't feel good just don't do it. Money ain't everything.

In taking up this didactic discourse, Toni suspends her practice of 'booktalk' and says little of substance about Tom's character or actions but rather focuses on the lesson learnt in terms of obedient children and avoiding strangers. Thus she moves between discourses as she is called to take up different positions as a reader. In Litha's responses she again issues warnings to her group with trite clichés for them to carry with them as future advice rather than examining any flaws or growth in Tom's character and enriching their understanding of what was read. For Litha, a

book equates with lessons for life for the readers and her responsibility is to make these explicit to the group. Drawing again on Halliday's (1994) construct of tenor, which relates to the relationship between reader and author, it is possible to understand the dominance of the moral lesson in Litha's responses to novels. If culturally, 'reading' for a 'moral lesson', has been most valued and practised, which is the case if the 'reading' fare consists exclusively of didactic texts, then Litha's tendency from the perspective of tenor, is that she ascribes a didactic goal to the authors of novels. So from the domain of culture she draws on a didactic approach to novels as opposed to a literary one.

When Vusi asks a genuine question, Litha's interpretations are challenged.

Vusi: Guys, Ok, I have a question and it's for Litha. This question of mine is why did Tom believe that that man will give him a job that will be good and not bad?

Litha: He actually saw the cars he was driving. He thought that owning money, having so much things doesn't come out of doing crime because it actually is crime. We have to face the fact.

Nandipha: I don't really agree Litha. It's like this, he only saw him once and ja he was driving an expensive car but he didn't know it was expensive. I think he, he was ... umm

Toni: Attracted by the little girl.

Nandipha: I know. Besides that, like, his outspoken words, you know, he's friendly, he was very outgoing, like you know. He seemed like a very helpful person you know.

Litha: Ok, well

Noli: I agree with Nandi.

Litha: I actually agree with all of what you've said and it is good to agree to disagree, and guys I think that's enough. That's a wrap, this was from the Conceited Kids.

When Vusi asks Litha a question based on her understanding of characters and their relationships, Litha has to shift, as her discourse of the 'moral lesson' is insufficient in this instance. Here she draws on cultural values of 'large cars' and 'dubiously sourced wealth' to understand the presentation of Masters. Nandipha resists this interpretation and, in drawing on textual evidence to support an alternative reading, positions herself as an authoritative reader which is supported by her group.

Litha's response closes down any probing of ambiguity or nuance in the presentation of Masters or Tom with accepting that 'its good to agree to disagree' which might appear diplomatic but sidesteps the development of a position based on textual evidence or unpacking what is suggested beyond the explicit. So in striving for group coherence and involvement, and by avoiding disputational talk, Litha's contribution works to keep the group discussions focused on one practice: that of lessons explicated. As a structure the reading club provided opportunities, both for individuals and the group, to draw on existing practices and attitudes to reading in the domain of culture (at the level of the Real) in their engagements at the Actual. Through these three recordings, the Five Conceited Kids, as a group, begin to engage more substantially with the 'booktalk' of the reading clubs. Reading club structures allowed them agency to monitor their literacy practices and modify the dominance of popular culture through ongoing efforts of their own. This speaks strongly to the agential affordances of the reading club structure which allowed recasting opportunities. It seems axiomatic to claim that developing a reading identity takes time and effort but the striving to take on literary terms and to apply them discursively to build dialogic understandings of the book, indicates how difficult these shifts can be.

Yet one more recording of the Five Conceited Kids allows us to track this development. This time, the group was discussing *Seedfolks*. On this occasion only three of the Five Conceited Kids were present as Toni and Vusi were absent from school that day. It would seem from the extracts that follow that the remainder of the Five Conceited Kids managed to find enough to say without Toni's support.

Litha: Ok. Hey there, these are the Five Conceited Kids with two people missing. We're talking about our book *Seedfolks*

Noli: By?

Litha: By Paul Flysmann. It's basically a book about, concerning the environment and nature, and the chapter in the book in which it talks about where electricity is cut off and the people don't stop planting and doing what they've been doing in the garden, which just goes to show that umm, nature is good. Nothing stops you from being a natural person and caring about your environment. Umm ... Yes, that's my understanding of the book. I'll be handing it over to Nicki and she'll tell you more about her experiences reading the book, and this is Litha September speaking in 8C. Yes?

Noli: My best party of the book is, Marcella. Marcella is a 16 year old pregnant girl. We don't really know their nationality as it's very confusing. Um, ok, um she's pregnant, she doesn't care about what people think, she just does what she does and if it works out for her then whatever happens she doesn't care. Well umm, her parents had a problem with her being pregnant at first but then at a later stage became excited about it because they love little kids, and ... This book is interesting, some may have said it's boring, it's unenthusing but umm, we've read it and we think it's a good book actually. Although it does confuse us a bit. I will be handing it over to Nandipha. Nandi is still finding the information that she needs because she doesn't really know what she wants.

This discussion is far more focused on the book than their initial attempts to talk about *My father and I*, as discussed earlier. Although the girls recognise the challenges of *Seedfolks* as being somewhat confusing, they focus on sections that they can connect with, like sixteen-year-old Marcella's pregnancy predicament. Thus, as a group, they avoid 'the discourse of the boring book' while negotiating tentative understandings. While Litha's dominant practice is still to extract moral lessons for her group, prefaced by such phrases as 'which just goes to show', she has also recognised the central concern of the redemptive effect of the communal garden<sup>17</sup>. What is also new here is a recognition that there is an author involved. This signals a shift in literary awareness where a title is often followed by the author's name as further clarification about the title under discussion. It marks an awareness of the author figure as a significant contributor to the novel and a possible guide to future reading. It also indicates their awareness of the 'structure' of the book. As a group, they now position themselves as members of a Discourse who recognise the role of the author and so, while 'the discourse of the moral of the story' is still important to Litha, the girls here have interacted agentially in directing their group's discussion in their own way – and supported by details they find relevant. In this instance they have also acted agentially in eschewing the categories of *title* and *character* which guided their discussions on *Don't tell me what to do*, and instead have chosen to start with what they understood and enjoyed.

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<sup>17</sup> Through participation in reclaiming a neglected plot of land, residents gradually shift from working alongside each other to working together in a community and in so doing each resolves her own independent challenges.

While some of their comments are still vague, there seems to be a shift away from radio talk to booktalk.

Nandipha: Okay, Nandi speaking here. I haven't read much of the book but in a way it's very motivational in the way this book concerns human being who are very nurturing. Umm It's very confusing, very, very confusing but ... umm, it seems as if in every story, it's, it's a book based on each and everybody's story umm ... how they turn out to be nurturing people. Umm, ok.

Litha: Like Nandi has said, in the end it actually all comes together. All these people from all these different worlds come together to make this project a successful one and we have learnt a lot from reading the book because now we are changing our mindsets. We are more now going to look at our environment and the places we live in and building an equally strong community and caring for one another.

Noli: This book is about a garden filled with garbage. It looks like no place for a garden, especially to a neighbourhood filled with strangers, where no one seems to care until one day a small girl clears a space in the hard cracked soil to plant her precious beans seeds. Suddenly the soil holds promise to Curtis who believes he can win back Leticia's heart with a harvest of tomatoes to Virgil's dad receives a fortune to be made from growing lettuce and even too Marcella who is 16 and pregnant, wishing she were dead. There are thirteen very different voices: old, young, heightened...

Litha: Hispanic, Taiwan and hopeful tell one amazing story about a garden that transforms a neighbourhood.

Litha: Thank you and that's a wrap.

Here we see less concern with establishing radio personae and Nicki Minaj, Sweetness and Senorita Maraja do not surface at all. Instead we have three learners more focused on unpacking their understanding of the novel than on how they are being perceived in the recording and on asserting their personae. In this shift they seem to take up booktalk as a more viable alternative and state their understandings tentatively while acknowledging confusions and uncertainty. Maybe because there are fewer members present Litha feels less need to control the talking and curtail people's suggestions. Instead she builds on Nandi's thoughts in noting how all the characters contribute to building the garden, and then relates it to an environmental focus in their lives. Noli's recognition of the motivation behind each character's gardening effectively winds up their discussion and Litha signs off with her characteristic, 'that's a wrap' demonstrating the resilience of the 'DJ Discourse'.

The interplay of learners' agency with the structures of the reading clubs, including material structures such as books, and cultural resources, including discourses, allowed learners to experiment with new practices and 'try on' a reading identity. In these reading club spaces, they made reading clubs meaningful as a literacy practice by "infusing them with cultural knowledge and comfortable peer relations" (Dyson, 2003: 333).

## CHAPTER 7

### READING AS WRITING: WRITING AS READING

*I learn by going where I have to go,*

- Roethke

#### 7.1 Introduction

In the last chapter I looked at how learners exercised their agency in talking about books in reading club events over the period  $T_2$  to  $T_3$ . Some, like the Tigers and, more latterly, the Five Conceited Kids, used cumulative talk in building a shared understanding while the Cool Cats engaged in more exploratory talk. Various discourses, such as 'the discourse of the boring book' or 'the discourse of the moral lesson', were mobilized while learners simultaneously experimented with 'the discourse of the book' to make sense of their reading. In their 'booktalk', learners also engaged with different Discourses, such as the radio and rap discourse of the Five Conceited Kids and the 'teacherly' Discourses of questioning their group members. Through talking in the various reading club events, learners could take up agency to try out the 'discourse of the book' while sharing what they appreciated thereby signalling a form of reader identity which was unevenly spread and uniquely manifested between, and within, groups. Speaking about books was therefore one type of experience for the learners of being a particular 'kind of reader'.

In this chapter, I argue that writing offers another entry point into Discourse encompassing the idea of being a reader. It offers an alternate space (or structure) to draw on 'the discourse of the book' (i.e. to draw in discourse as a mechanism in the domain of culture) and to develop confidence through practice which, in critical realist terms, would be conceptualised as an experience at the level of the Empirical achieved through engagement in repeated events at the level of the Actual. As a structure it allowed reticent or shy learners to participate as equals in a writing space, without the jostling of competitive voices. Structurally it also offered opportunities to engage with a supportive and interested 'other' to build a dialogic understanding. In addition, within the educational structures of the school and

classroom<sup>18</sup>, writing is seen as evidence of learning, or not. Moreover the process of reflecting and *writing* about books added legitimacy to the whole reading club process. In line with ‘outcomes based’ thinking, learners had ‘produced’ journals as evidence of their learning. The learners themselves wanted to improve their writing and shared in feedback slips and final reflections how they valued ‘correction’ in line with a discursively constituted understanding of ‘good writing’ and saw all my responses as being ‘corrective’.<sup>19</sup> While they might not have embraced writing with the same enthusiasm as talking – it demands more effort after all – learners’ final interviews indicated that they too, drawing on shared discursively constituted beliefs, valued writing as a form of learning.

In this chapter I follow a similar process to that employed in Chapter 6, i.e. of presenting vignettes. This again allows me to focus on a particular instance, in this case of writing, as an example of a wider experience. In order to provide a backdrop to this wider experience, firstly I discuss how journal writing evolved as an emergent, interactive development, thereby complementing the ongoing reading club discussions. I then present three vignettes of the early writing of three learners to examine how they exercised their agency to write - and how this expanded my perceptions of them. I argue that in, and through their writing, the social conditions of and for literacy emerge. Lastly I present a detailed vignette of Jackie’s (from the Contagious Kids) journal writing in which her emotional response (experienced at the Empirical) drew on discursively constituted values and beliefs (in critical realist terms located in the domain of culture at the level of the Real) about, for example children, as in *Mpho’s Search*, or families, as in *The Rainman*, and all within the reading club process (at the level of the Actual). These short vignettes on early writing, as well as the longer vignette on Jackie, all explore learners’ experiences of being readers though the medium of the written word.

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<sup>18</sup> I should just note that there was never any pressure for me to conform to school practices. In fact the school administration was very supportive of my opening up the library and engaging in book talk with the learners. Nevertheless, I felt I should respect school practices and enable learners to better engage with them.

<sup>19</sup> In their final interviews learners commented on my responses to their journal-writing as corrective, even though I did not initially correct any grammar or spelling. After learners asked to have their errors corrected, I indicated some problems. As I was interested in their responses to the books and did not want to curb this in any way, I never used a red pen or asked learners to ‘do corrections’.

## 7.2 Journal writing context

Journal writing provided a space for the written discursive construction of identity (Ivanic, 1997). Instituting journal-writing as a regular practice established the 'social conditions of production' (Fairclough 1989). The regularity of the journal-writing event served to establish this as a structure within the reading clubs in relation to which learners could exercise their agency. The practice of writing a journal also emerges from a set of beliefs in the domain of culture, including the importance of writing for learning, and of practising correct spelling and grammar, as well as developing a response and 'cracking the code' of essayist writing. Learners were encouraged to write regularly but exercised their agency to do so in different ways.

Writers make choices in writing but these choices are constrained by structures and mechanisms such as social circumstances, educational opportunities or membership of interpersonal networks. In the domain of culture, different kinds of writing are valued as being worthy or providing evidence of learning, with the schooling systems placing essays at the top of the class. Wertsch refers to these mechanisms or choices as an "array of mediational means" (1991: 94). So in writing we see a manifestation of the repertoire of choices that the individual writer could draw on and consciously mobilize at the point of writing. As Pat in the Cool Cats demonstrated, a repertoire of reading practices enabled wider possibilities for engaging with the text for herself and her group, so an array of mediational means can empower the writer.

Reflective writing is a particular type of writing which emerges from values and beliefs (in the domain of culture at the Real), as well as via engagement in particular practices of writing, at the level of the Actual. Observations of performance in writing at the Empirical have been used as a gatekeeping device or a marker of one's ability in exams and assessments. As referred to earlier, in schooling systems in South Africa and elsewhere, the ability to write a response to a text is a cornerstone of many formative and summative assessments and thus can either facilitate or hinder progress to higher grades. The fact that learners chose to write continuous prose, when offered the choice of more graphic forms of presentation, such as Venn diagrams or cartoon illustrations, indicates the dominance of *prose writing* as a school writing practice. To be seen as a 'good' student required some demonstration and accomplishment in this practice, so learners take up prose writing in efforts to

become members of this dominant Discourse. In other words, school and educational mechanisms (at the level of the Real) constrained learners' agential options in reading club events as alternative response formats, such as Venn diagrams or cartoon strips, were rejected in favour of narrative prose. As New Literacy theorists have shown, writing is a socially embedded literacy practice in which the context calls for, and values, different types of writing. In so doing, these types of writing become normalized as the 'correct way' to write in this context. So, the context of the school and the English subject classroom, as well as established school practices, which value certain kinds of texts (by drawing on discourses in the domain of culture at the level of the Real), all no doubt contributed to the learners' perceptions and actions – as was evident in their writing practices.

Initially, journals were used to scaffold reading club practices, so when a group was given copies of a new book, each member was expected to write some predictions, drawing on schema theory (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1989; McVee, Dunsmore & Gavelek, 2005), based on the cover, the title, the author, the picture and any 'blurb' or other information. In addition they were encouraged to note any responses to the books in preparation for the group discussions: they could use the 'discourse of the book' categories of *plot*, *character* and *setting* to structure these writings. After group discussions they were encouraged to add to their initial notes. Later in the process, they were asked to write some questions they wanted to pose to their groups. This practice happened on a weekly basis with one or two periods allocated to finalizing journals, group discussions and predictions on new books. To set the context further, journal writing was not assessed for marks at all: neither were the group discussions or the novels read in groups. So, reading clubs and journal writing were *practice*, rather than *assessment* driven.

### **7.3 Writing as skimming the surface**

In the following section the initial entries of some of the learners whom we have met in the discussion groups earlier, are presented and discussed. I felt that, having heard their voices in discussion and seen their interactions within each group in relation to reading, it would be useful to examine the same learners' use of dialogue journals as a means of engaging with books. I was particularly interested in how these learners used their journals as a dialogic space and what practices,

experiences and discourses they drew on to enhance their reading in any way. So, although my initial interest was in how *writing* enhanced *reading*, learners' journals also pointed to the contribution of social structures, like the home and school and how these conditioned learners into literacy-based understandings and positions - and ultimately into identities. How learners exercised their agency to write, and the social conditions of literacy work in homes and schools, thus emerged via different levels of analysis.

Firstly, Jackie from the Contagious Kids, writes about *Don't tell me what to do*; then comes her reading history, followed by comments on *The Runaways*. This is followed by Lilla's (from the Tigers) comments on her reading history and on *Mpho's Search* and *Seedfolks*. Lastly from the Cool Cats, we have Adam's reading history and his thoughts on *Seedfolks* and *Mpho's Search*. Jackie did not immediately take up the reading club practices and her group seemed to interact on a cursory level so I was interested in the different kinds of engagement that developed in her reading journal. Like Patricia in the Cool Cats, Lilla was already positively disposed towards reading but I was interested in whether her voiced understanding would be reflected in her journal interactions. On the other hand, because Adam was quiet in his group, his journal provided an alternative space to reflect and to have his voice heard.

### **7.3.1 Writing vignette: Jackie**

When journal writing was added to the reading club practices, Jackie seemed barely to comply initially as her first page entry shows in Figure 7.1. She had also been named as disruptive by the class teacher and her behaviour in early reading club sessions and in whole class teaching supported this view. Although she has drawn on 'the discourse of the book' to list some components, such as *title*, *character* and *setting*, her staying at the level of a list does not indicate an understanding of each of these. Her comments on the main character, Tom, are also quite concise.

It is a male and he was still youge whom didn't have any parents and he was seventeen years old.

This was probably gleaned from the opening pages but in overlooking Tom's father, Tom's reason for leaving home is lost. Jackie has tried to check the details (as the correction in the age shows) as she wants to be right. The comments on setting

show confusion about what is meant by 'setting' and where this information will be found. Some of what has been written under setting was copied from the back cover of the book, e.g. "published at five levels", which has been put between "Place in London" and "it is a rural area because there is farms" to create a confusing whole. Each section has been shaded a particular colour – even the feedback comments – to create a colourful impression.

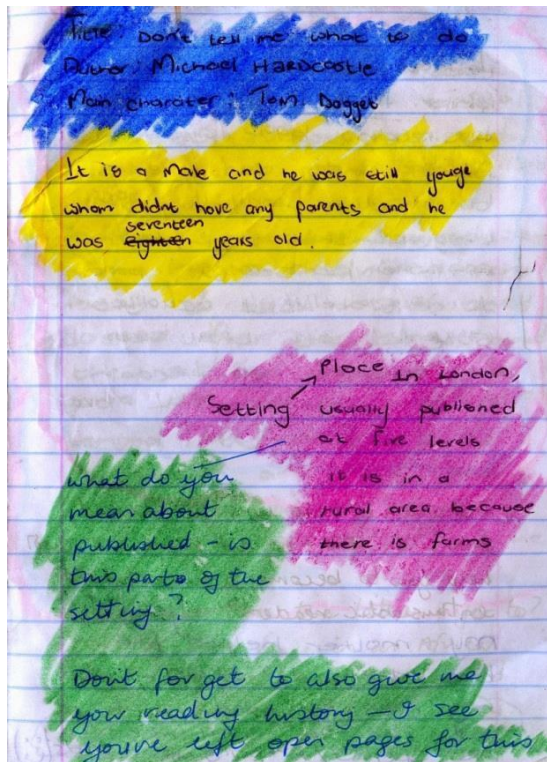


Figure 7.1 Jackie's first journal entry

Jackie's attempt to write a meaningful comment has resulted in her appropriating text from the novel cover to masquerade as her own words. This is reflective of a learned practice of finding discrete information in the text in response to questions. Jackie's use of this practice could indicate how prevalent it was in her primary school and that her answers do not need to make any sense to the learner, and may never be read by a teacher.

In colouring her text, Jackie's concern is on the visual appeal rather than correct writing. Adding colour to text and a concern for the visual, would appear to have been a valued writing practice, (and therefore discursively constituted in the domain of culture) that learners have brought from primary school. Of course the detail of

what was written shows where the gaps are in the writing and understanding. As the purpose of the journals was for learners to reflect on what they had read, no comments were made on the quality of their writing, nor were errors in grammar, spelling or expression corrected: the focus was solely on the content that learners chose to share in their writing.

In her second entry (see Figure 7.2 below), Jackie responded to the written request for a reading history which had initially been given about two weeks earlier.

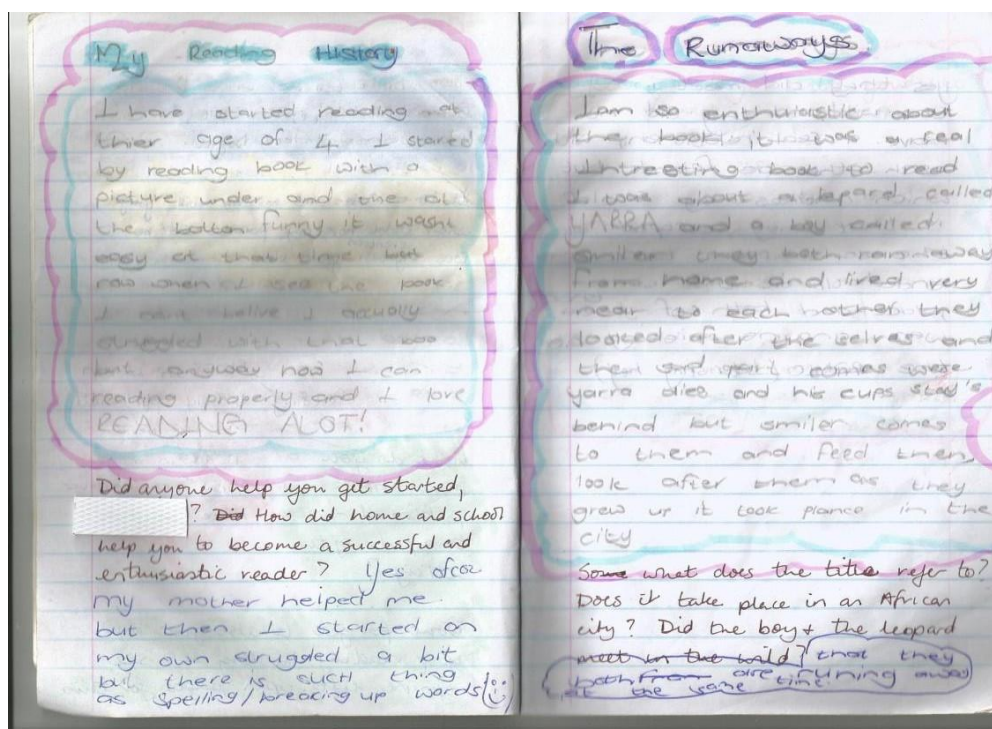


Figure 7.2 Jackie's second and third journal entries: Reading History and comments on *The Runaways*

In her reading history Jackie mentions that she started reading picture books at the age of 4. This was seemingly independent of help or location and presumes the availability of suitable picture books which engaged her interest. Writing a 'history' encourages the choice of a narrative genre as a practice developed in primary school. Again it is quite a short entry, about 50 words, but the use of more extended prose enables her to reflect on those first reading attempts and to remember the difficulty she encountered - and also to recognize her progress:

Funny it wasn't easy at that time but now when I see the book I can't believe I actually struggled with that book.

The emphasized ending with the change to uppercase font makes a strong claim for a 'reading for pleasure' disposition. This had not been evident in her early reading club discussions or in whole class sharing of reading, so there was a question mark about what kind of reading - and what she meant by "reading"- as well as how quantifiable 'a lot' was. What is also noticeable is the absence of any other agents in her early reading process as well as any specifics in terms of titles, authors or characters. Pretorius & Ribbens (2005) warn about claims of reading without substantiating detail. They suggests that those who read extensively would remember titles and characters but that learners, who claim to love reading but don't provide this evidence, usually have not had opportunities to read widely or extensively. It would seem, then, that Jackie enjoys and values reading by drawing on discourses at the level of the Real which construct reading as enjoyable and valuable: however her practice (at the level of the Actual) may have been constrained by an absence of materials. In other words she enjoys the idea of the practice, without the experience of it.

In her response to my asking for more detail, the confluence of social and school practices emerges as she writes 'yes of coz' her mother helped and 'there's such a thing as spelling/breaking up words'. It would seem that the technical skills of phonics and phoneme awareness proved useful in helping her make meaning from the text as these are established orientations to literacy in primary schools (Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005).

Jackie's third entry, on *The Runaways*, opens with an emotional response to the novel,

I am so enthusiastic about the book it was a real interesting book to read. I was about a leopard called YARRA and a boy called Smiler they both ran away from home and lived very near to each other they looked after they selves

She connects with challenges facing this runaway boy who looks after the leopard but in an attempt to address the setting writes, "it took place in the city". She, like the Cool Cats in their discussion of the *Seedfolks* setting, draws on discourse of an

urban/ rural divide, which does not include notions of farming villages or peri-urban market gardening. In her form of writing, Jackie seems unconcerned with punctuation or syntactic rules but rather with getting ideas onto paper. There is a sense of breathless excitement, conveying the enthusiasm of her response to the story. As the focus of journal writing was on the content of the entry rather than correctness, as mentioned earlier, my response asks for further details to pull the characters and title more closely together. The conversation about the novel continued in the same breathless fashion, as the following extract illustrates:

Yes the did meet in the wild and they did not have a relationship with each other as friends but which makes they simler is that they escaped out of the same time and ended up at the same place and both of them were anouns missing on the radio (interisting hey)

In some ways the title, *The Runaways*, highlights the similarity between these characters but this clue is ignored.

In the Contagious Kids' first recorded discussion, we saw how Jackie did most of the talking with the others contributing very little, so little discussion ensued. As learners had self-selected their groups, it was presumed that this would be based on some sort of compatibility or allegiance, but this was not apparent in this particular group. Within this context, it would seem that reading clubs, as a structure for learners to interact in peer-led discussion groups, could have been initially frustrating for this group's members. When Jackie takes up journal writing as a means of reflection, the possibility for engaging in a conversation was provided, by means of real questions on her responses to the text, as opposed to corrections and marks. Her sincere attempt to respond involves her in making connections with the text and moving into another kind of understanding which she finds more relevant for herself. The 'interisting hey' clearly signals how this response is important to her understanding of the story and invites the respondent to share her insight. She draws on a rhetorical device typical of informal conversation to indicate a dialogic move in the retelling of the story, while acting to assert her authorship.

Whereas Jackie ignored my questions in response to her first journal entry, she responds to the next two. Responding to questions needed to be established as a practice at the Actual as a means of expanding or substantiating thinking. It would

seem that for Jackie the practice of journal *writing* provided a better opportunity to engage in dialogic ‘literate talk’ than the practice of *talking* in her reading club, though she drew on both structures to engage with the text. So the journals function as a structure, at the Real, which learners can draw on to effect emergence of written talk about reading at the level of the Actual. Jackie’s particular use of journal writing, as a reading club structure, is examined more deeply in the final vignette.

### 7.3.2 Lilla

In contrast with Jackie’s initial ‘disruptive’ positioning, Lilla, from the Tigers, was keen to participate in every aspect of the reading clubs from the outset. She adopted a ‘teacherly’ position in her group’s discussion to ensure their presentation on *Don’t tell me what to do* would be successful. She also visited me in the library to take out additional books and reflects on one, *Prince Caspian*, as her third journal entry. The details she provides, indicate a home background that was more aligned with school practices of literacy so that Lilla’s transition to schooled reading was relatively straightforward and supported her claiming a position as a reader. In critical realist terms she is able to draw on social structures and discourses related to reading and writing in the domain of culture which allow her to effect the emergence of practices which are more closely aligned to those of the school. Lilla proves not only to be an enthusiastic reader but also a conscientious writer as evident in her writing forty-eight pages in her journal, far more than any other learner. In addition to *Prince Caspian*, she also commented on *Secrets* by Jacqueline Wilson and *Theodore Boone* by John Grisham, and refers to JK Rowling and Harry Potter books at various stages, all of which all supports her claim to a reading identity (Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005).

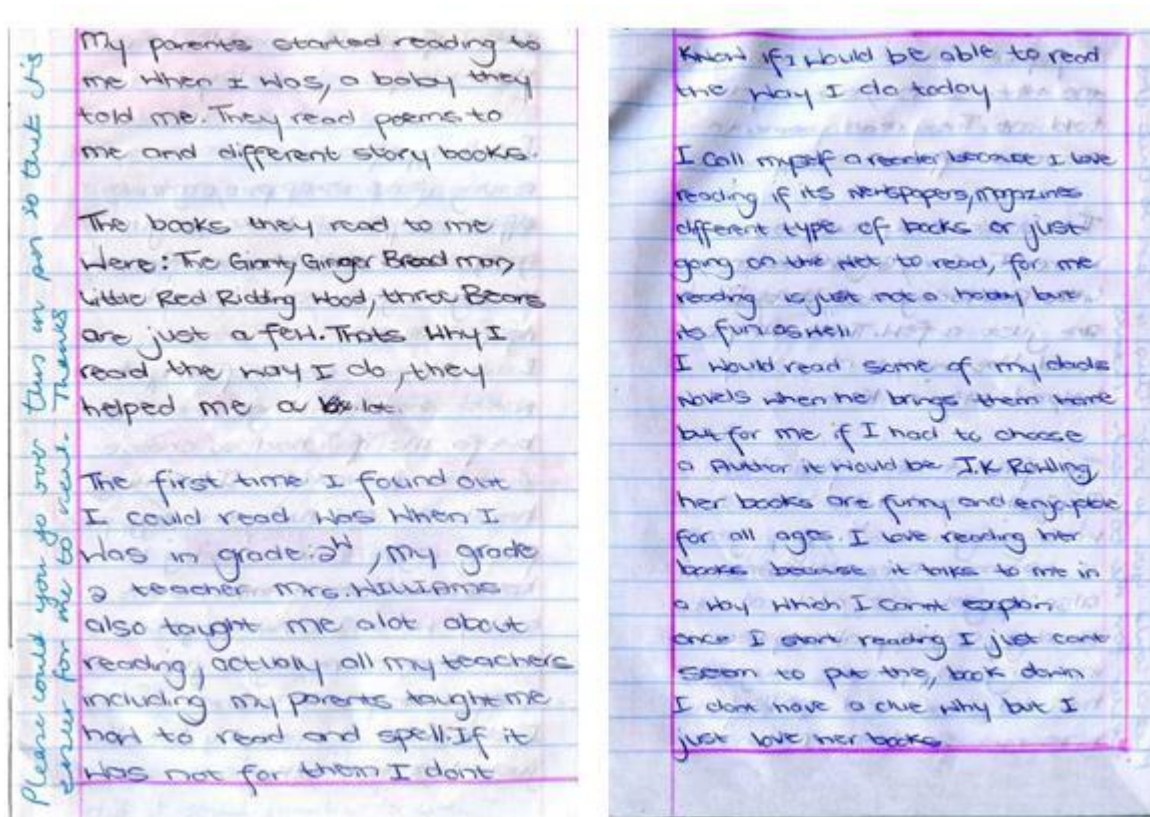


Figure 7.3 Lilla's first journal entry: her reading history

Although Lilla acknowledges all the input from parents and teachers in her literate habitus, she does not seem to have the discourse skills required to explain her enjoyment of JK Rowling. Her phrases such as “talks to me in a way which I can’t explain” and “I just can’t seem to put the book down” and “I don’t have a clue why” seem to indicate that her enjoyment of JK Rowling is beyond her understanding, or her ability to articulate it, though she has already labelled them as “funny and enjoyable”. It would seem that ‘booktalk’ is not part of a practice she has been engaged in or seen modelled by parents or teachers and as a result her comments seem to skim the surface of the mysterious appeal of books for her. So far her eagerness and enjoyment has been sufficient to maintain her reading trajectory. So, in spite of the availability of the material structures in the home context, as well as reading and books being valued (at the level of the Real), there are still limited practices of reading (at the level of the Actual). Lilla’s claim to a reading identity derives from her engagement in a variety of materials. In her final journal reflection she comments that while others find reading boring, she is different in her enjoyment of reading.

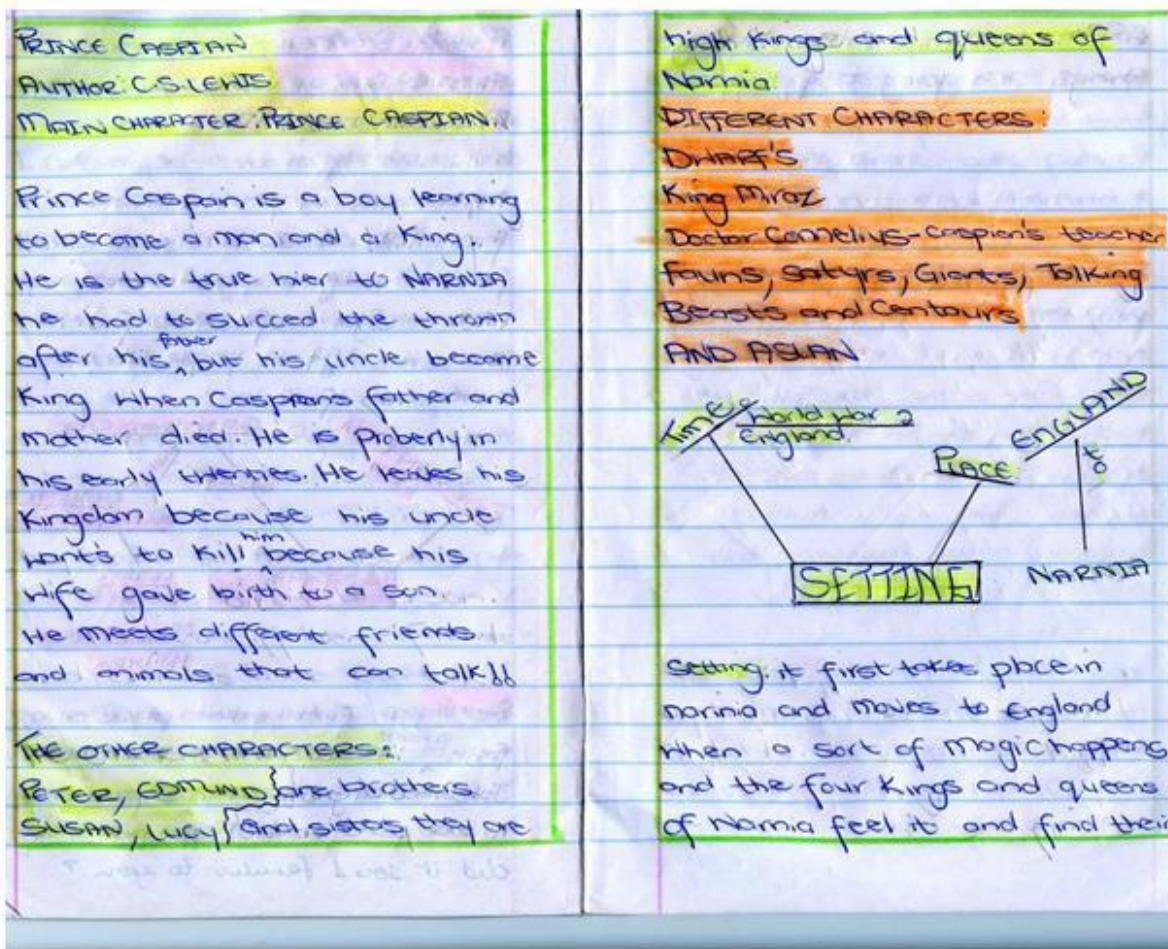


Figure 7.4 Lilla's second and third journal entries, *Prince Caspian* and *Mpho's Search*

In her next journal entry, Lilla exercises her agency to reflect on her reading of *Prince Caspian*, which she borrowed from me in the library. From her comments about the book it would seem that she has some familiarity with the Narnia series as her list indicates Peter, Edmund, Susan and Lucy as the high kings and queens of Narnia and she writes "AND ASLAN" at the end of the list with no explanation,

apparently presuming a shared knowledge with the reader, namely me. This indicates she has not internalised the 'rule' of writing as a mode of communication: that the writer should always create a context for the reader. Her writing is a mixture of prose, lists and a diagram of the setting. In including this novel, Lilla speaks back to the positioning of grade 8s as non-readers as she is clearly claiming an alternative position. She uses her agency to draw on 'the discourse of the book', with attention to characters and setting, in her independent reading and writing. She reads for enjoyment, is self-motivated, grasps the story and makes connections across the books she reads: all indications that she has already taken up a position as a reader and displays this willingly to a fellow reader. Through this new structure of journals, Lilla can exercise her agency both to engage with an interested other, and to explore books dialogically in an ongoing conversation. These practices indicate how Lilla's sense of herself as a reader develops beyond a verbal claim as she also engages in a Discourse which encompasses reading making choices regarding what to read from the library: this indicates an *Affinity* identity in Gee's terms. Her sense of herself as a reader has been supported by the 'advantage', though this is limited, of the structural and cultural resources in her home.

The juxtaposition of these two entries speaks to the motivational power of choice and agency. In contrast with *Prince Caspian*, a book she chose herself, Lilla's entry on *Mpho's Search*, read by her group, is quite short and does not reflect the same level of enjoyment. As I was particularly interested in her writing about reading club books, I have included her fourth entry as it was her third on reading club books and it was about a title we have encountered in reading club talk, namely *Seedfolks*.

Unlike her other entries thus far, here Lilla spends some time exploring her predictions about the story that she is about to embark upon.

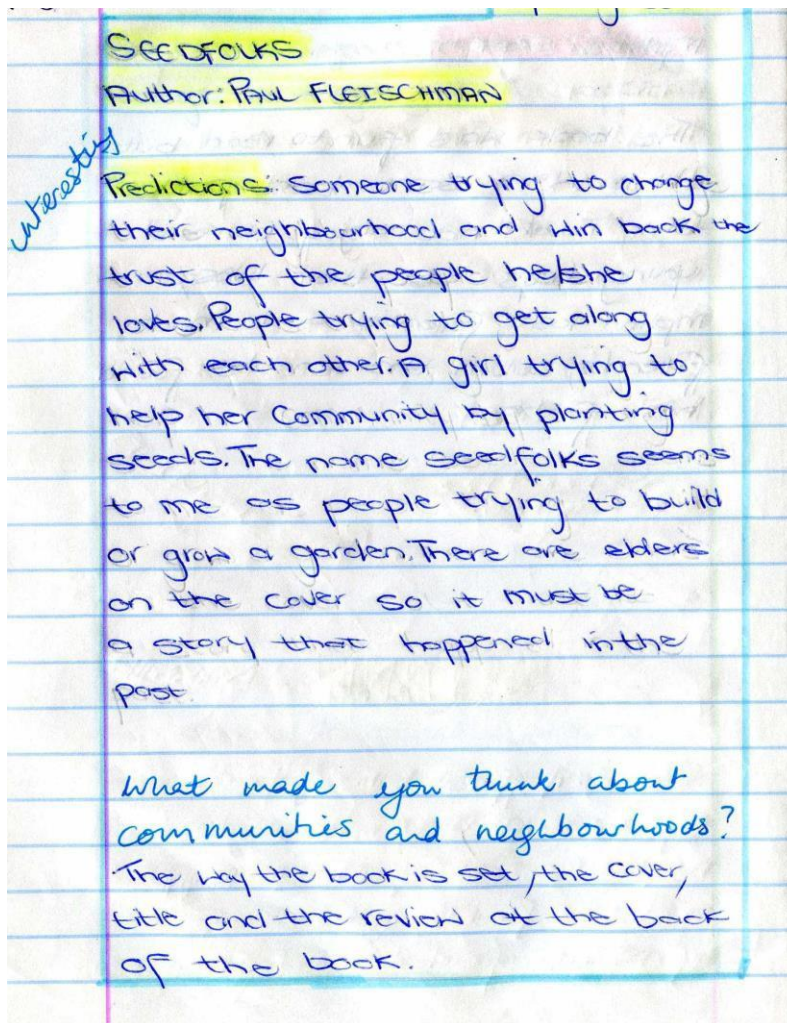


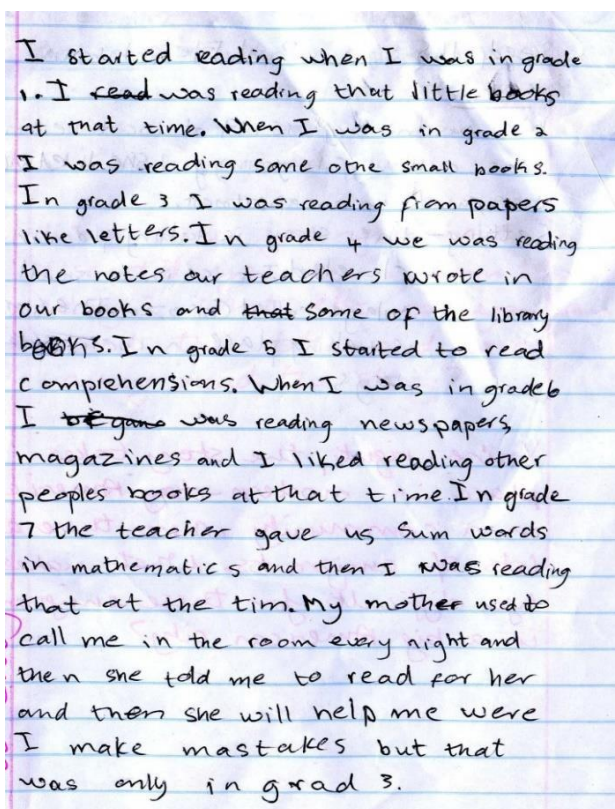
Figure 7.5 Lilla's fourth journal entry, *Seedfolks*

Here Lilla focuses on the idea of a neighbourhood and community as sites of collective or individual agency. When asked to explain the origins of this idea she refers to “the way the book is set, the cover, title and the review at the back of the book”. By ‘the way the book is set’ she could be referring to the structure of the book in naming each chapter after a different character and telling that chapter from the particular character’s viewpoint. The cover consists of a series of frames with the different characters’ portraits in each. It could also be seen as a series of windows from which each character looks out onto the world of the communal neighbourhood garden. Either description of the cover would tie it more explicitly to Lilla’s understanding of the importance of the neighbourhood. In both her reference to the structure of the book and to its cover, Lilla does not support her comment with any evidence or details but rather lists sources of her *impressions*. Thus she does not yet engage in the practice of explicitness so characteristic of essayist discourse and part

of what formal school seeks to develop and evaluate. So here all Lilla's advantages of a resourced family who value and engage in reading are not sufficient to apprentice her into a particular schooled engagement in explicitness. That this practice is unfamiliar to Lilla is also evident in her taking up a 'teacherly' stance (i.e. a teacher asking questions to which she knows the answers and pronouncing on the incontrovertible truth of these answers) in the reading club discussions. Although evidence was presented in her group's discussion it was not accepted as an opportunity for exploring and expanding ideas. Home and school practices thus far have not made explicit the practices of engaging with texts in a schooled way, and so have constrained, to some extent, both her talk and writing about books.

### 7.3.3 Adam

Adam was one of the quieter members of the Cool Cats who had engaged in discussion about *Seedfolks* in Chapter 6. Adam's journal writing begins with his reading history which tracks his memories of reading through school grades and with support from his mother.



I started reading when I was in grade 1. I read was reading that little books at that time. When I was in grade 2 I was reading some othe small books. In grade 3 I was reading from papers like letters. In grade 4 we was reading the notes our teachers wrote in our books and that some of the library books. In grade 5 I started to read comprehensions. When I was in grade 6 I ~~to game~~ was reading newspapers magazines and I liked reading other peoples books at that time. In grade 7 the teacher gave us sum words in mathematics and then I was reading that at the tim. My mother used to call me in the room every night and then she told me to read for her and then she will help me were I make mastakes but that was only in grad 3.

Figure 7.6 Adam's reading history

From Adam's account of his reading trajectory it would seem that reading was a skill learnt and practised almost exclusively in the social structure of the school. If it is understood to build up cumulatively it would move from a focus on 'little' and 'small' books, in the early years, to a more applied approach in being able to read teachers' notes, to library books and comprehensions and newspapers and finally to word sums in grade 7. This suggests that extended reading decreased from books to comprehensions and newspapers to word sums as he progressed through school. So instead of reading longer, more challenging texts it would seem as if the opposite happens: texts are used for assessments in the form of comprehension and word sums. In this way 'reading' is reduced to an occasional practice in the service of assessing proficiency without extended practice or reading for pleasure experiences. Home background, as a social structure, becomes important in the public display of reading with the appearance of Adam's mother in grade 3 to help him when he made mistakes. It is not presented as a site of reading for pleasure or other literacy practices. Instead the home was a site for remediation to achieve correctness in line with school practices. The school provides one set of structures but draws on a very specific sets of beliefs about reading and writing (including the importance of phonics, spelling and practising reading) which are also constrained by the structure of the school (in terms of time available, class sizes and teachers' literacy orientations).

Here is Adam's entry for *Seedfolks* over two pages. The first page was in preparation for the group discussion, while the second was a reflection afterwards. He seems to have inverted the ideas of prediction before reading, to an accuracy check after the event.

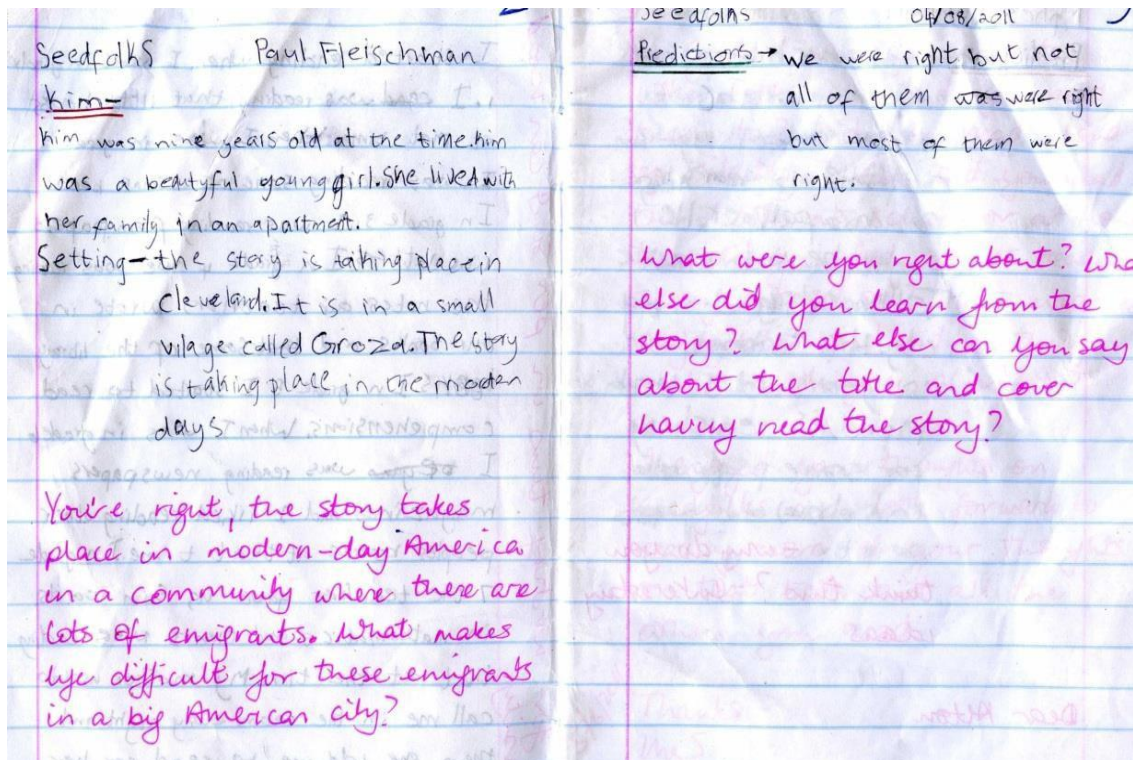


Figure 7.7 Adam's second journal entry: *Seedfolks*

His focus on Kim as the main character is in line with the group discussion. Kim's story is the first one told so it may also be an indication that Adam had not read further, or, if he fixed on Kim as the main character, then he might find further reading challenging as Kim is not the focus. Besides focusing on the main character, his other concern is with the setting. The story is described as "taking place in Cleveland. It is a small village called Groza. The story is taking place in the modern days." Adam draws on 'the discourse of the book' to organise his writing around established categories. He draws on his schema of community villages as a lens to understand the setting and does not take up the clues offered in my response to refine his thinking about setting. He has also used a 'comprehension-answering' practice of skimming for discrete words, here 'Groza', to address the setting challenge without reading around that name in the text to ascertain if that was the setting of the story.

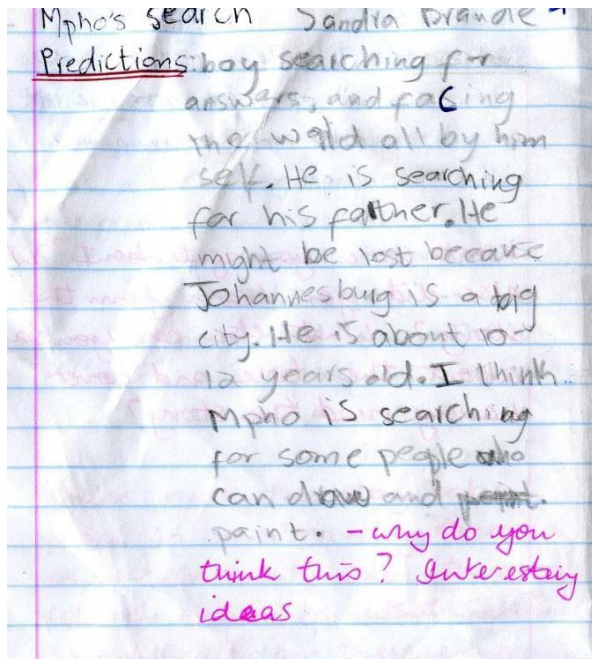


Figure 7.8 Adam's third entry: Mpho's Search

Here Adam has written his predictions based on the cover and title before going any further into the book. He then adds a further note that Mpho might be searching for “some people who can draw & paint” but does not indicate what has prompted that prediction. On the cover a young boy stands against a background of street art but Adam does not mention this, partly because this is his own reflection and he does not need to make it explicit to another reader, though he knows he is also writing for me, and partly because the art work is quite clear on the cover and so should be recognised by us both. For Adam then there is less need to capture in words, as is the wont in essayist practice, what is visibly obvious in pictures. For me, as one who is immersed in words and an essayist tradition, there was an expectation that writers would back up their claims and I did not see where Adam's thoughts about artwork came from until I looked at the cover again. We are clearly drawing on different mechanisms in our 'reading' of the cover, and what 'writing predictions' should contain. In the dominant school based writing genres, which Adam and all learners need to access, claims need to be substantiated so as to be made explicit. Through the practice of writing predictions, in the reading club structure of writing exchanges, Adam has had many opportunities to appropriate dominant 'name and claim' practices.

It would seem from the first pages of learners' journals that adding journal writing responses to the reading club structures, was something unfamiliar. Structurally they each had a new notebook for their own thoughts and ideas about reading but the practice of reflecting on books in written form was a relatively new experience. Up to this point they had engaged orally and now they were expected to shift to a written form without a clear understanding of the written genres of journal writing (which would be structures at the level of the Real) to support them. Culturally the concept of using writing as a tool for learning and as a vehicle to deepen their thinking and understanding was not familiar. As studies of writing in South African schools have shown (Hendricks, 2008; 2009), writing occurs irregularly and is often summative. If learners are going to use writing as an exploratory practice they need time and support to become familiar with the practice of using it in this way. Initial forays into journal writing were therefore expected to be thin on detail and rather cursory.

So although agentially learners could take up this new stance in writing about their reading, many preliminary entries skimmed the surface of the book. Culturally, writing had not been used as a means of investigating their thinking or probing understanding. New practices and forms of writing take time to develop and so through engaging in this dialogic exchange, it was hoped that learners would understand that writing provided a means to explore and appreciate their reading, while further developing their writing.

#### **7.3.4 Wading in the shallows or plumbing the depths? Jackie in detail**

Journal writing offered a hybrid transitional space in which, through conversations with a supportive 'other', learners begin to approximate and appropriate the dominant school writing discourses. As such the journal acted as a writing scaffold. Its focus was firstly on the learners *having something to say about the books*, and then on *how it was said*. So, as a structure within the reading club structures, it allowed learners to draw from their repertoire of writing experiences (in the Actual and Empirical) as they wrote about the books. For example, Jackie benefits from this alternative structure of reading club journal writing, which allows her agency to share her connections with the text. She manifests the kinds of affective characteristics Rosenblatt advocated in her reader-response theory and these emotions (at the

Empirical level) have a basis in the values (i.e. in the domain of culture in the Real) which are enacted in the practice of journal writing (at the Actual).

Using Archerian (2002) terms, Jackie's journal can be understood as an 'internal conversation'. She shared her initial understanding of the purpose of the journal in our final conversation as follows:

Jackie: Ja, I just write 'cause when I have a thought in my mind, it was like a diary to me. No one was gonna read it and that made me write more personal things, how I felt about the books, what books really meant to me, ja.

She wrote firstly for herself and her own thinking. It is in the process of writing and reflecting, I argue, that there is transformation from first-order emotionality to second-order emotional commentary (Archer, 2000). This occurs through her reflexivity, a form of talking to herself, which Archer (2007c: 2) suggests can take the form of "a running commentary on what is taking place". The hybrid nature of journal writing, as well as our ongoing written conversations, provided the context and structure, for her to engage in internal conversations around reading.

In introducing journal writing I did not expect formal academic writing. Instead it was a space for *written conversations* about the books. As her early entries show, Jackie took up the conversational tone in her journal writing. What I will argue, in relation to Jackie's writing, was that drawing on the cultural mechanism of conversation did not 'fix' her writing as speech: instead within the journal writing structure (which allowed for internal conversations) it enabled her writing to move closer to school writing in incremental steps. However, in adopting the discourse patterns of speech in our journal conversations, ironically Jackie's 'internal conversations' appear to position her as a novice writer who has not learned the 'rules' for making meaning in writing, one of which is the importance of contextualization as writing, unlike speech, travels over time and space. However, while she may have thought journal writing was for her own reflections, in our written conversations her awareness of an audience grows as she uses writing as a means of understanding her reading. In my analysis I will show that, as Jackie's *responses to the literature* become more thoughtful (the 'what to say' or content), so too, her *writing expression* (the 'how it is said') also develops.

While Jackie's early journal comments were characterised by "first-order emotionality", this is replaced by more focused, tentative claims, or "second-order commentary", as is seen in her opening comments on *My father and I*: "I think the book goes about a girl and her father and think she's either looking for her father or wanting to know her father". This seeming uncertainty from Jackie seems to signal her trying to make sense of what she has been reading. It is an interim comment, an example of an internal conversation, not inviting a response: this is her sharing of her early exploratory thinking. This novel was not a graded reader but was a so-called 'trade' book written for general consumption via bookshops – as opposed to those adapted to different levels of reading ability and maturity and punted at schools. As such it was a longer, more challenging read which called for ongoing monitoring of comprehension and private internal conversations.

Jackie pauses her thoughts on *My father and I*, to reflect on reading with the following entry:

I love reading book I wouldn't mind spending a hole weekend in the library and just read book after book it is so nice reading book I realy like/love reading book expecially about teenagers and (scary)books ect.

This is followed by her signature as a form of contractual commitment to her future reading. While language teachers would find plenty to correct here, her message offers certain insights into her affinity for reading. Firstly, books offer her some form of escapism as she would like to read 'book after book' for a 'hole weekend'. Secondly, she does not see reading as a social activity and feels no need to have anyone with her to share this experience: she is self-sufficient in her own enjoyment of reading, thereby indicating a maturity as a reader, though the effusive nature of her comments might belie this. That the library is the recognised space for reading these books – as opposed to her home – is also significant. As mentioned earlier, the school was in the process of reclaiming the library and I had been using it as an informal space for engagement with books by opening it at break-times and allowing learners to browse and select books of interest. Jackie had never exercised her agency to visit the library at break, though, discursively she constructs the library as a space for reading and selecting books. In commenting on libraries in her final interview, she notes that she had visited the local library in the past but she 'didn't

look right' so did not find the interesting books. So, she is aware of the library as a structure with material resources for reading, but is constrained by the structures, resulting in an inability to negotiate this and access the materials there effectively.

So although there is a desire to read, and an envisioning of the reading experience (Langer, 2004), this has not, as yet, translated into a different way of being. Gee (2006: 166) suggests that identities take work and need to be crafted out of social and cultural resources in what he terms "self-fashioning". Through talk and the use of "I-Statements", such as Jackie's "I love reading books" and "I wouldn't mind", Gee shows how teenagers 'fashion' themselves and enact different identities. Jackie's use of internal conversations in her journal can therefore be seen to contribute to her reading *affinity* identity.

After this interlude to commit to reading, Jackie returns to *My father and I* with a more serious focus, or in Archer's terms, with 'second-order emotional commentary'.

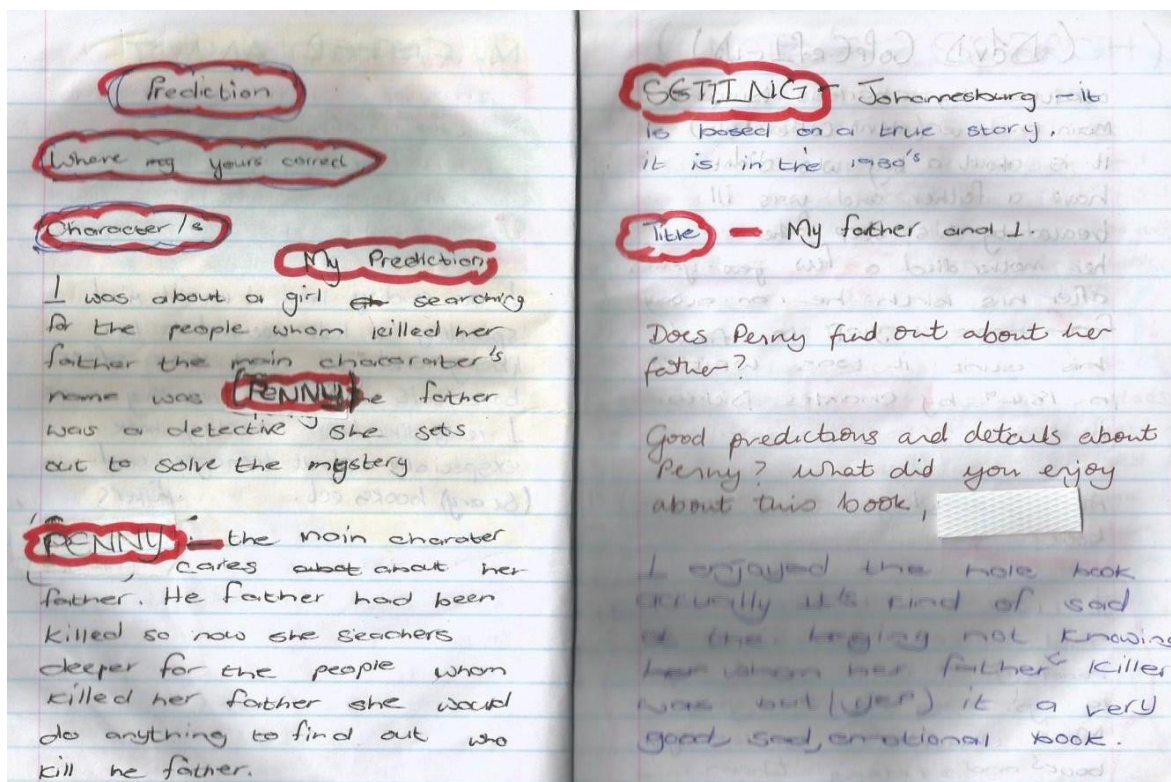


Figure 7.9 Jackie's second entry on *My father and I*

She begins with what I have termed earlier 'the discourse of the book' as a means to structure her thinking and so comments on her predictions, characters and setting. Her focus is on Penny, the main character, and her search for her father's killer, as

the mainspring of the plot of the story. Jackie emphasizes this as a driving motivation for Penny with “she would do anything to find out who kill her father”, thereby indicating her insight into Penny’s determined search. In this entry we see Jackie’s agency in taking up a more schooled approach to literature in foregrounding the discourse of the book in her enactment of school-type literacy practices. As she becomes more explicit in ‘naming’ the issues and ‘claiming’ her understanding, she reserves her personal response to the book until asked - and tries to formulate this by looking at the book in its entirety:

I enjoyed the hole book accually. It’s kind of sad at the beging not knowing whom her father’s killer was but (yet) it was a very good, sad, emotional book.

Jackie here tries to reconcile the seeming contradiction of her enjoyment of a sad book. She recognises that she has connected emotionally with the main character, Penny and her search for her father. She does not share the antipathy expressed in the Five Conceited Kids’ discussion of this novel and did not seem to find the historical setting alienating in any way.

In her comments on *David Copperfield*, Jackie follows the same approach: discourse of the book, followed by personal response when requested. However her emotional connections with *Mpho’s Search*, provokes a very different response. In Figure 7.10 below, these two types of responses are juxtaposed. The first on *David Copperfield* follows the guidelines with noting the author, title, main character and setting, with a brief outline of the initial story line and then a more personal response to my question. In contrast, her understanding of plot and character in *Mpho’s Search* is framed within a personal response. In her final interview, Jackie commented on how she connected with the books by ‘visualising’ the story, and, in the case of *Mpho’s Search*, she had imagined her young cousin lost in Johannesburg and his likely reactions in those circumstances.

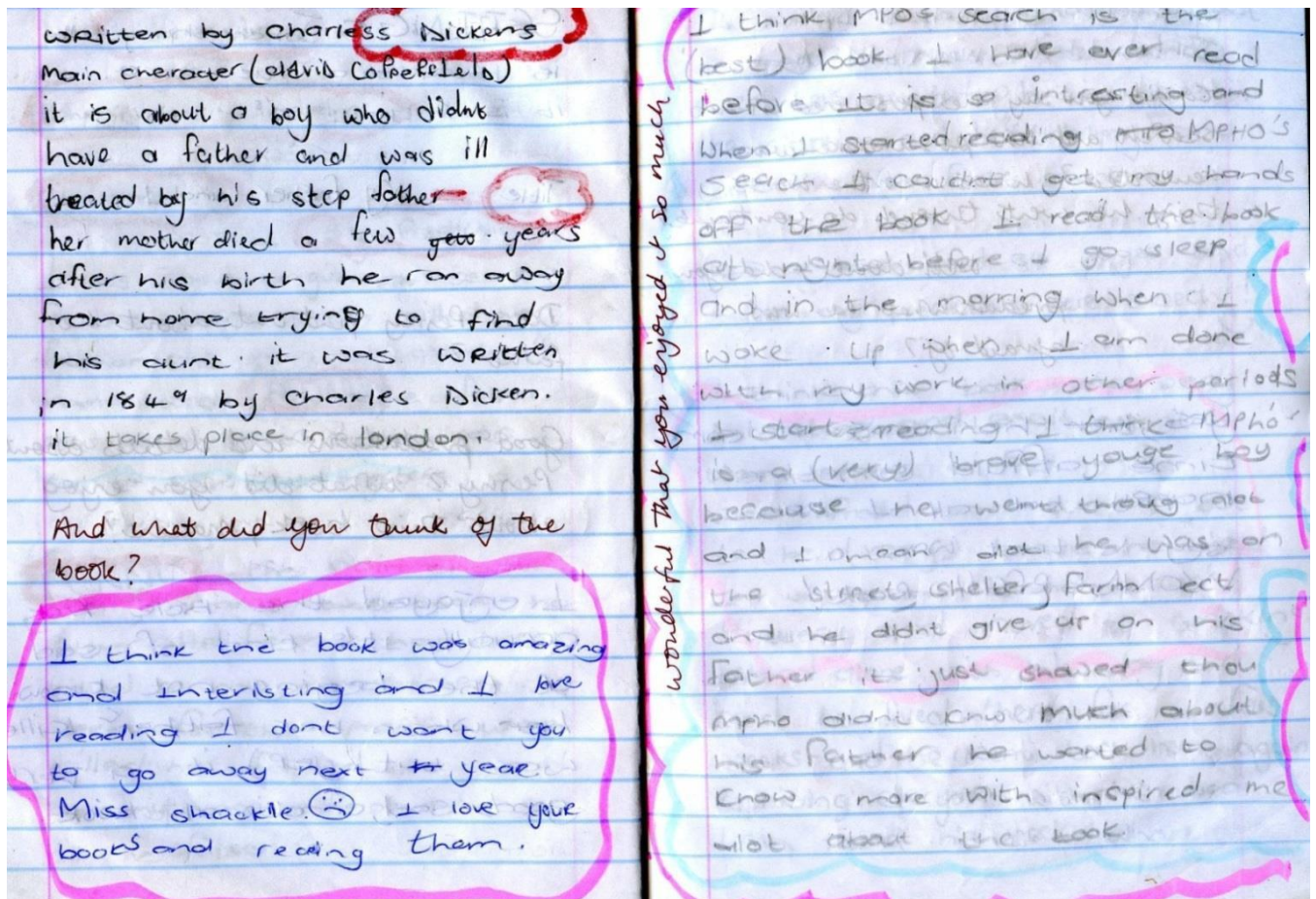


Figure 7.10 Jackie's comments on *David Copperfield* and *Mpho's Search*

At a structural level reading club journal writing allows learners agency in responding to texts in different and equally valued ways. While 'the discourse of the book' (including character and setting) offers one type of response framing, learners can exercise their agency to adapt, select and reframe their responses. The Cool Cats' discussions on *Seedfolks* showed how in their *talk*, the learners adapted and selected from 'the discourse of the book', and their own repertoires of practice, to reframe their understandings. The fluid structure of journal writing allowed for similar 'reframings' in *writing*, as in this case, Jackie, reframes<sup>20</sup> her understanding of Mpho in Johannesburg.

<sup>20</sup> I think Mpho's Search is the best book I have ever read before. It's so interesting and when I started reading Mpho's Search I couldn't get my hands off the book I read the book at night before I go to sleep and in the morning when I woke up. When I am done with my work in other periods I start reading. I think Mpho is a (very) brave young boy because he went through a lot and I mean alot he was in the street, shelter, farm ect and he didn't give up on his father it just showed thou Mpho didn't know much about his father he wanted to know more with inspired me a lot about the book.

In her comments on *The Boy who was Afraid*, in Figure 7.11 below, Jackie changes her approach somewhat.

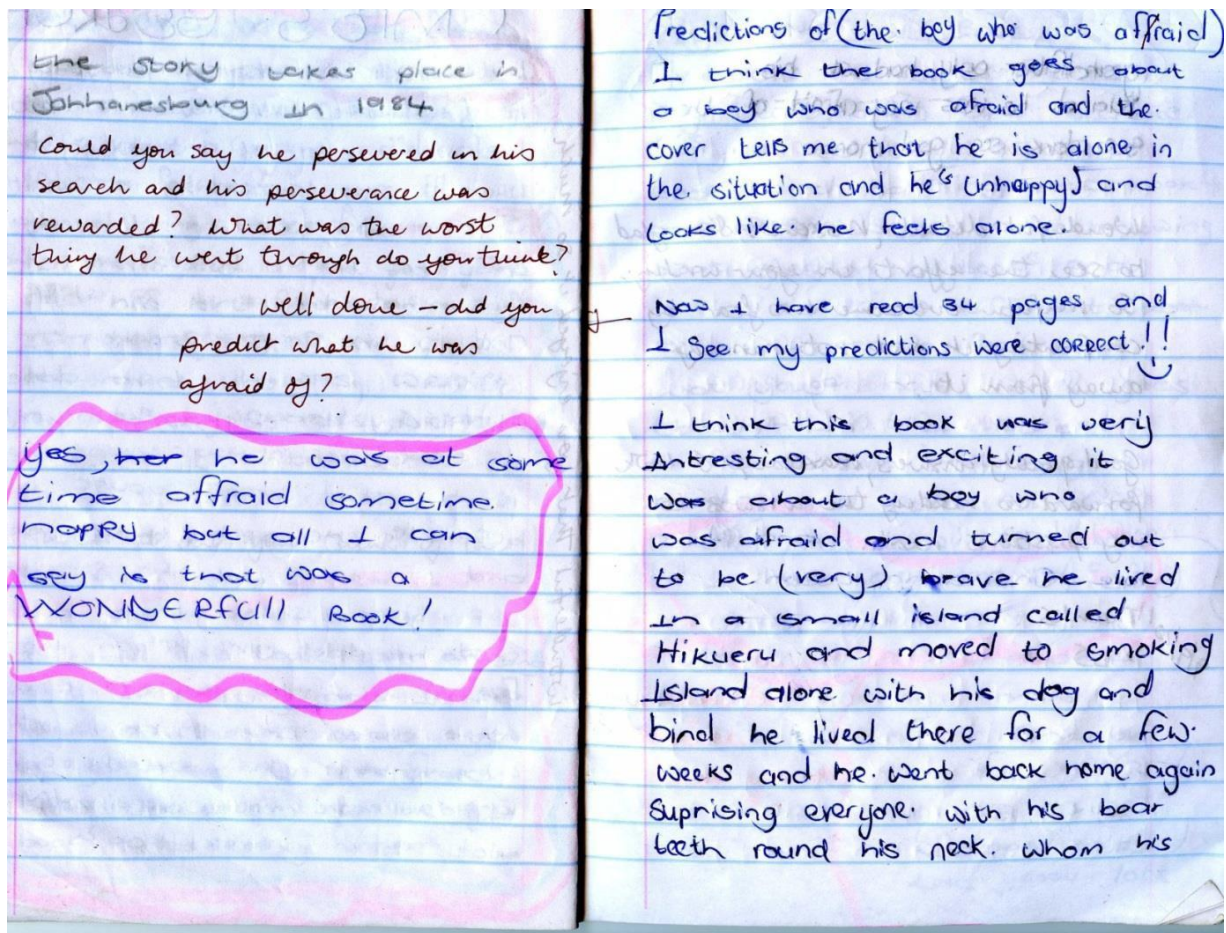


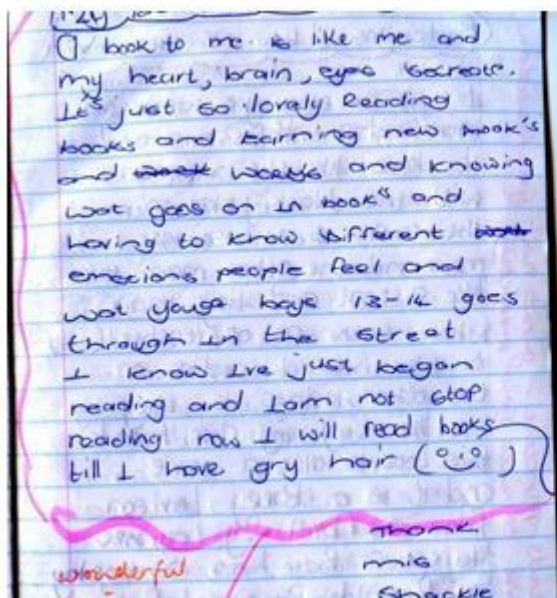
Figure 7.11 Jackie's entries on *Mpho's search* and *The boy who was afraid*

Predictions had been modelled to the whole class using *The Hunger Games*, in a think-aloud demonstration. Jackie acts to apply this practice to her reading as a form of comprehension monitoring. She stops reading at page 34 to record in her journal that her assessment, of the boy being 'alone in a situation', is correct. She had tried 'predictions' in her entry on *My father and I*, but here she uses her journal *while reading*, to record and refine her thinking. After the predictions, her comment starts with a summative I-statement, "I think the book was very interesting and exciting" and she then continues with details to support this position.

It was about a boy who was afraid and turned out to be (very) brave he lived in a small island called Hikueru and moved to smoking island alone with his dog and bird he lived there for a few weeks and he went back home again surprising everyone with his bear teeth round his neck whom his grandfather only had at his island. He was very afraid of the dark see god monao.

Here Jackie has claimed an understanding and has named the sources or details that substantiate her claim. In addition, from the language teacher's perspective, there are relatively few errors, in comparison with her earlier writing. The tendency to let ideas flow into each other is still there, but so are correct spelling and syntax. I would argue that in taking up school discourse positions, as in naming and claiming, Jackie also makes fewer language errors in her writing. In contrast, when she engages in a very personal reflection of her appreciation of reading, as she did in her next entry in 7.12, her concern is not for correct English. So Jackie uses her agency to switch between registers (or first and second order commentaries) in the different kinds of writing she engages in. As she takes up school-based discourses, in terms of how to respond to a book, so she approximates school-type language. Within the reading club journal writing structure she adopts the necessary register (from the cultural domain at the level of the Real) in her practice of writing (at the level of the Actual).

In her next entry, at Figure 7.12, she switches back to first-order emotionality as she attempts to capture her responses to reading novels.



A book to me is like me and my heart, brain, eyes secreate. It's just so lovely Reading books and learning new book's and word's and knowing wat goes on in books and having to know different emotions people feel and wat youge boys 13-14 goes through in the street I know I've just began reading and I am not stop reading now I will read books till I have gry hair ☺

Figure 7.12 Jackie's comments on reading

Although it was an established practice by now that journals would be shared, read and responded to, Jackie was still happy to record this very personal response. In her final interview Jackie commented that she saw her journal as a kind of diary. It is worth noting that nothing like this had been voiced in her group discussions by this stage. When discussing an earlier book, Jackie had demanded answers from her group members and berated those whose contributions were thin: she then proceeded to give her own comments and all was done in less than two minutes. None of the others in her group took up the possibilities of the journal to the same extent, though the other girl in her group was quite diligent and insightful.

Jackie did not ask for my response in any way but knew I would read this. It would seem that for her, journal writing had become an expression of feelings about the practice, process and content of the books. I was not the target of her writing: it was not done to please, appease, impress or satisfy me as the 'exotic outsider'. My reading and responding to her journal writing rather encouraged her to think more deeply about her writing and her thinking about the role of reading in her life. Through this iterative process, and an awareness of herself as a reader, Jackie has extended the depth and breadth of her thinking and writing about books via this internal conversation process.

Thus far the journal entries suggest that Jackie has a particular understanding of the use of journals. For her, the introduction of the journal structure allowed her to explore cultural beliefs about reading in very personal ways. From these entries we can see two distinct types of responses. Firstly, there is her enthusiasm for the process and practice of reading novels, often characterised by spontaneous expression with little concern for spelling or language errors. Although many learners had voiced the importance of reading and books for them, none displayed the same level of enthusiasm and compulsion for reading. Secondly, Jackie uses her journal to practise engagement with 'the discourse of the book', while also affirming being a reader and engaging in the discursively embedded practice of sharing thoughts about books with an interested other. As she practises engagement with this discourse, through reading many books and writing regular journal entries, her writing improves, from the perspective of the language teacher. The structure of reading clubs allows Jackie to exercise her agency by drawing on values in the

domain of culture to engage with the practice of reading and discussing books. Besides her general enthusiasm she also identifies very personally with the content and characters she encounters in these novels. For her, writing, rather than talking, is a sense-making modality in which she negotiates her understanding of her reading.

In her last few entries, Jackie's journal writing is characterised by more extended and detailed writing, interspersed with her own enthusiasm as she begins to explore the depths, so to speak. She has established ownership of the journal writing practice and is more confident in both our roles in the process. With this established base she is better able to go beneath the surface and explore more fully what was meaningful or confusing for her as I will show in selected comments on *Rainman*, and *Seedfolks*.

In her comments on *Rain Man*, at 7.13 below, Jackie tries to synthesize various elements and writes her most extended reflection, to date, in response to this book. She is more explicit in her predictions and makes inferences about the characters from details in the cover pictures, for example, thinking one is a business man and the other a teacher. She does not fear being wrong in committing these ideas to paper. Journal writing is not about the correct answer, but rather about developing and checking understanding in an on-going process.

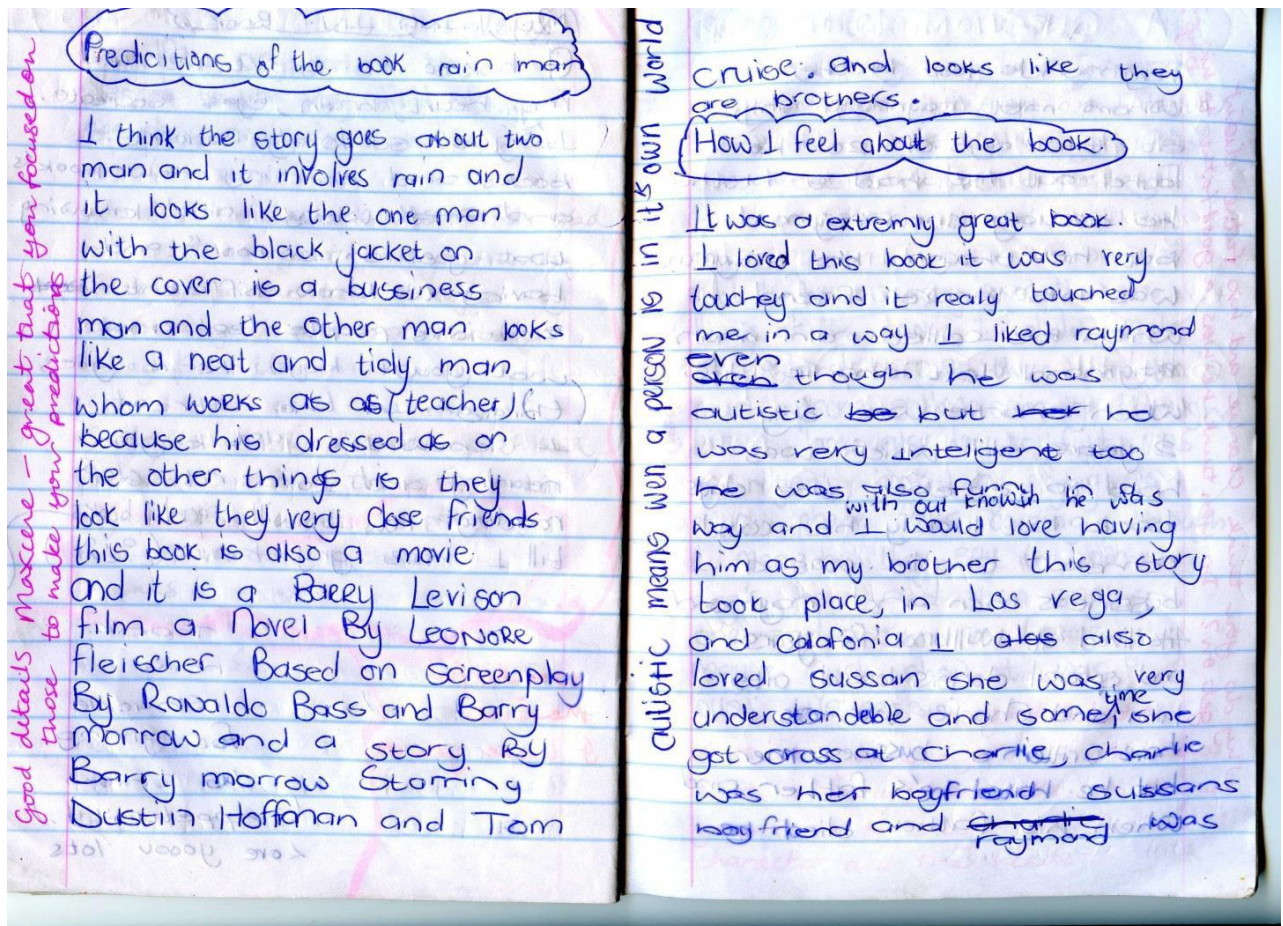


Figure 7.13 Jackie's first pages on *Rainman*

In Jackie's initial comments she attempts to synthesis the visual and the verbal. She comments on the pictures, with explicit comments on details of the two men's appearances, and the verbal support provided by the title and 'blurb' and so makes her understanding more overt to the reader and herself. She moves from the prediction stage to a final reflection on her appreciation of the story and empathy for Raymond, one of the characters saying she would love having him as a brother. She has also taken ownership of all the available space to add a vertical note about autism as an overriding issue in the book. Her corrections and additions suggest that she has read through and clarified her response both for herself and her reader. She, like Charlie, grapples with his gradual realization of his relationship with Raymond - as reflected in the second two pages of her entries at Figure 7.14.

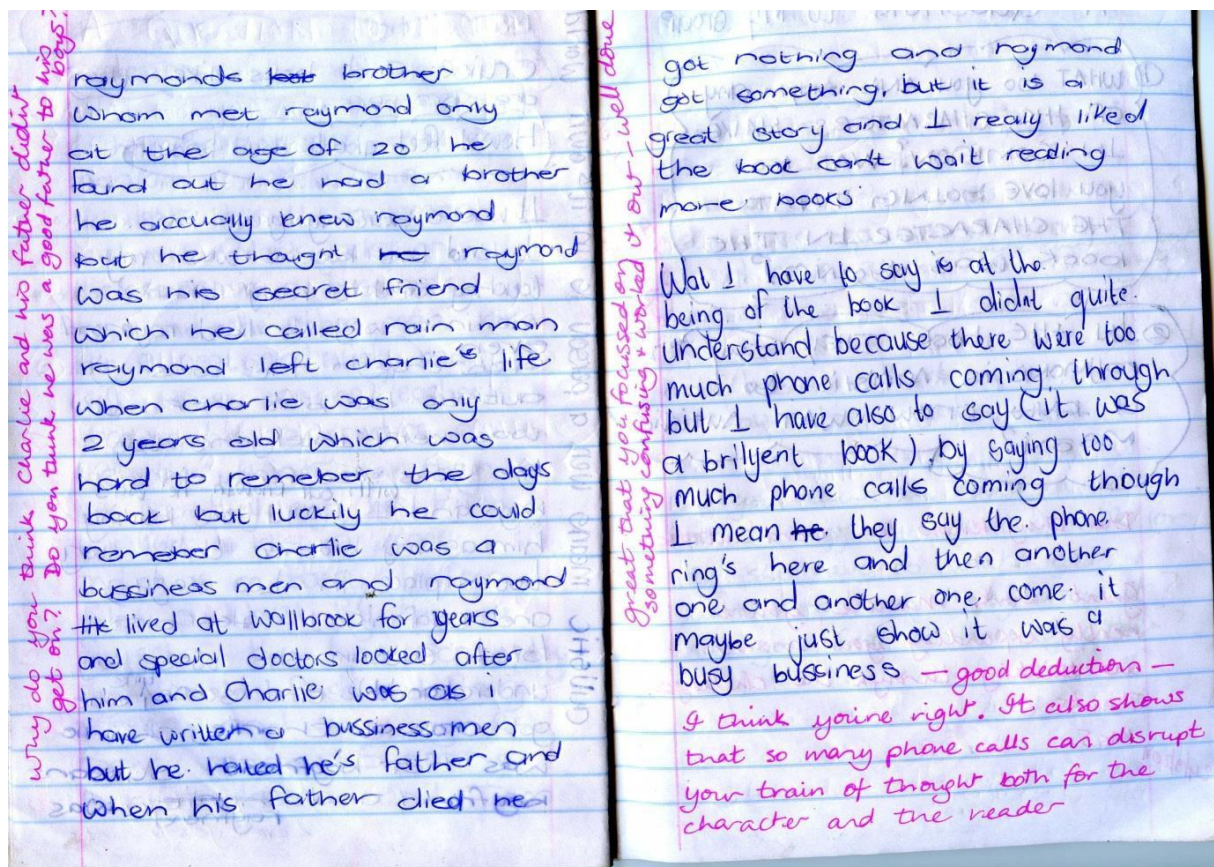


Figure 7.14 Jackie's further comments on *Rainman*

It would seem from the slight changes in handwriting above that Jackie's entries progressed from predictions to an engagement with the story and the complexities of the plot and character, to a more reflective stepping back and considering aspects that were challenging. She identifies the interruptions of the phone calls as both distractions in the unfolding of the main plot and in her following the thread of the story. She considers the contribution of the phone calls to the plot and decides they were indications that Charlie's company was busy. Here Jackie has identified an aspect of the story that was a potential obstacle to her understanding and thought back to why this was a challenge and what this section contributed to the developing storyline. She has moved reflexively beyond comments on the story to considerations of plot development to inferring what is not explicitly stated - thereby 'reading between the lines' - a key goal of any reading programme. It would seem that in her four pages on *Rainman*, Jackie has a more considered tone, and greater second-order monitoring, as she exercises her agency to explore her understandings as well as her confusions. In her final journal reflection, she said that *Rainman* was the book she would always remember.

In her next entry on *Seedfolks*, Jackie segues easily between reading and writing. She makes predictions based on the cover and the title, noting the old-fashioned use of the word 'folks'. She notes the author and the type of novel as a Joanna Cotler, all of which suggests her recognition of authors and their particular writing style or predilection for particular genres. As she starts reading she notes the difference in layout to other books with the picture of Kim at the beginning of the chapter, which she notes as a new technique.

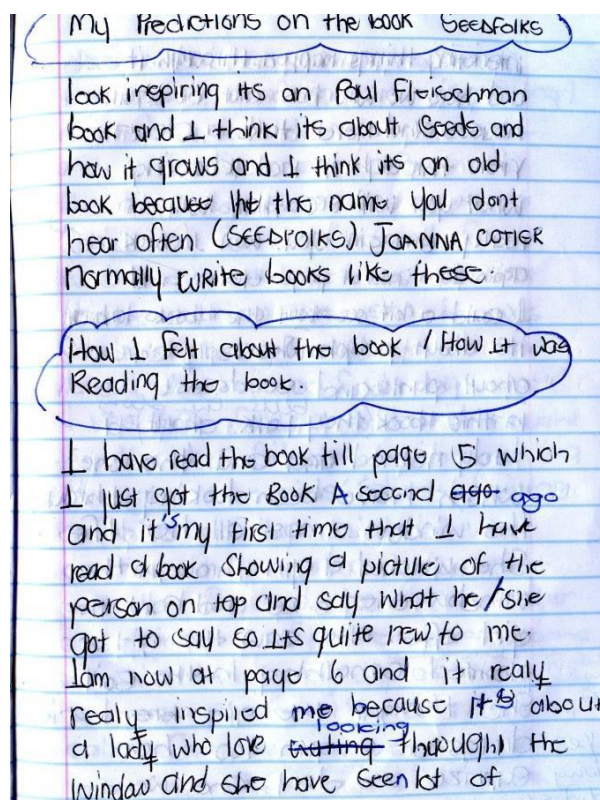


Figure 7.15 Jackie's initial response to *Seedfolks*

Her writing seems to parallel her reading with comments in response to the cover, and to page 5 and page 6 where she encounters the character Ana, who recounts the history of the area and the migration flows she has observed in the neighbourhood. It would seem that Jackie is using her journal to make sense of her reading in a continuous shuttling exchange. Through this interchange her writing and reading are reciprocally enhanced as they inform and develop her understanding. Jackie seems to have taken up journal writing as a tool to mediate her own understanding of a somewhat different reading experience. In Archerian terms she is engaged in internal conversations in the form of a 'running commentary' (Archer,

2007c: 76) about her reading. What is also noticeable here is her ability to self-correct and there is also evidence of a re-visiting of the text. She has clearly re-read her initial response and clarified her writing by adding the verb 'is' to read 'it *is* my first time...' and by changing 'waiting' to 'looking' to read 'a lady who loves *looking* through the window'. Although these are few and minor, they signal another move in Jackie's literacy trajectory: a recognition that *how* she writes can enhance *what* she writes. This is what teachers hope to achieve through process writing but often the focus is on *how* rather than *what*, so the content becomes subordinate to the expression. Journal writing in the reading clubs valued content and insight - and it would seem from Jackie's moves here that she has corrected her expression to make the content more understandable.

In her next two pages on *Seedfolks*, Jackie does not correct her writing at all as she is more focused on monitoring her comprehension. She retells Ana's vignette and links it explicitly to the initial story of Kim, thus making the connections more explicit for herself. She has recognised Ana as the repository of neighbourhood history who recounts waves of human mobility and migration in this Cleveland suburb. As the observer and recounter, Ana notes Kim's actions and through her misinterpretation connects to Gonzalo as the next link in the neighbourhood chain. Jackie takes note as new characters are introduced: she further notes their contribution to the diversity of the area, as well as their own individual challenges in this migratory melting pot.

Jackie attempts to chronicle her thinking and reading in her journal, both as a way of exploring her responses and in order to share her thoughts with me. This is stated explicitly in the next and final section on *Seedfolks* where she writes that she is trying to keep me informed and on track so I will understand her better. It would seem that an awareness of an audience has given Jackie a focus for her writing as she strives to explain the unfolding of *Seedfolks* to me.

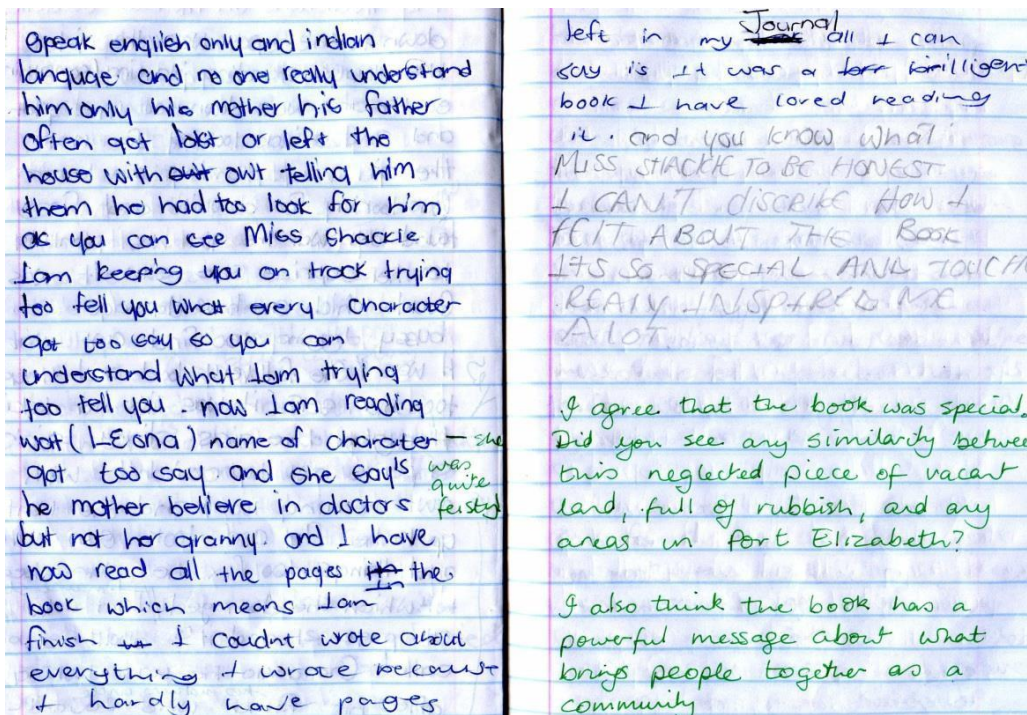


Figure 7.16 Jackie's final comments on *Seedfolks*

Although Jackie has provided a retelling of certain of the *Seedfolks* vignettes, she does not pull all the stories together in her final comment. She recognises that the book has inspired her a lot, that it was brilliant and that she loved reading it, all of which are very encouraging and motivating. She does not provide any final insight into what was brilliant or inspiring; nor does she provide a synthesis of how the various stories connect or the significance of the title. She would probably have benefited from a discussion with the Cool Cats where understandings were shared and refined, as the kind of synthesis they reached does not emerge in Jackie's journal writing here.

Reading club structures have allowed Jackie agency to write varied entries. There are the very personal comments on reading, where the journal was used as a diary; there are conversations with me around points of resonance; there are explorations of difficulties and of growing understanding, and there is comprehension monitoring. Much of this takes the form of reflexive internal conversations. Jackie's comments on her journal writing in our final conversation indicate how the emergence of her confidence in writing was linked to her agency in writing.

Jackie: I really think the journals helped me to grow in myself so I can write more because I felt like I was alone, I was writing what I feel and I would feel like it was my book and I can do what I want to with it so that made me write more about how I felt about the books and how I grew in reading.

For Jackie then the journal was a tool to improve her reading as she wrote her understandings about the books. Although she initially thought it would be enough to write only about characters and setting, she felt a compulsion to write more, as she explained in the final interview:

Jackie: Yes, I just don't know what happened to me. I just started writing and it was like my mind, it was overwhelming of the ideas. I experienced different emotions towards books and I can't really explain.

She felt the conversation was important as without it she would feel like 'Jerusha', in *Daddy Long Legs*, who wrote letters to her sponsor without ever receiving a response. In Jackie's case the openness of the journal writing structure allowed her to exercise her agency in what she wrote and how she wrote it. Through writing for an audience, and in her efforts to convey her understanding clearly, Jackie's writing changes through this process. The journal writing structures afforded her on-going engagement with reading and writing so that she could appropriate and approximate the dominant discourses of the school.

### **7.3.5 Conclusions**

Journals provided a structure within the reading clubs for learners firstly, to reflect on their reading and secondly to engage in a dialogue with an interested other. In addition it provided a tangible record of their reading and thinking as well as an indication of how their thoughts extended in the on-going writing engagement. As a new literacy practice outside of formal assessments, journals were taken up in different ways and became a means for first and second order commentary so that learners could gradually appropriate and approximate dominant school writing discourses.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSIONS

*Reading is like listening to people's thoughts. (Zola, the Tigers)*

*Books are like the sun –they brighten your day. (Velile, the Youth Representatives)*

*Reading is like knowledge turned into possibilities, like learning to fly. (Lindiwe, the Youth Representatives and Nela, the Cool Cats)*

*Books are like juice to me, you drink it and over and done with. (Gerri, the Tigers)*

From final journal reflections, 2011.

#### 8.1 Introduction

This final concluding chapter considers stage  $T_4$  of the morphogenetic framework which I have used as a conceptual framing for my study. At this stage, I need to consider to what extent participating in a reading club contributed to shifts in reading identity among the grade 8 learners. Archer recognises the difficulty of research in open systems, such as education, and refers to it as the 'vexatious fact of society'. Because she recognises the "quintessential ability of social structures to change shape" (Archer, 1995: 165), she advocates the morphogenetic framework as a theoretical tool to account for possible changes. As discussed in chapter 2, the morphogenetic framework offers explanatory power in its separation of culture from structure. Once these components from the Real are disentangled, we can consider how agents, in this case the learners in the reading clubs, interact with each. This is what is meant by analytical dualism. As my analysis in Chapters 6 and 7 has tried to show, this has involved the learners interacting with the reading club and other associated structures such as the library, the journals and the discussion groups as well as their engagement with discourses introduced in association with the reading club and with other discourses from the social context which conditioned their engagement with it at the outset – at  $T_1$  in conceptual terms.

Using a critical and social realist approach presumes that there is a reality and that research is one effort at accessing that reality. As it is not claiming to be 'the truth', it

is open to refutation and re-interpretation. Instead a realist account is an attempt to examine mechanisms in a detailed context so as to arrive at a particular understanding of the outcome observed in that context. Uncovering the underlying elements at the Real allows the researcher to suggest what it is that enables or constrains a phenomenon, in this case, emergence of a reader identity. Archer says “the peculiarity of all things social is that they are activity dependent” (1998: 361), so it is in the activity, in this case of reading clubs, that agents engage with and in this participation we see the interplay of structure and culture. Temporality, or time, is a central consideration as “emergence takes time since it derives from interaction and its consequences which necessarily occur in time” (Ibid: 14), as is the case for Gee’s (2000) identity developments. As *time* is a determining factor in assessing to what extent morphogenesis has or has not occurred so, having considered the conditions obtaining at  $T_1$ , presented vignettes of the learners from  $T_2$  to  $T_3$ , I can now draw some conclusions about the structural and cultural constraints and enablements throughout this process and the way these have contributed to shifts in identity.

Although Archer, in talking about education reminds us that “small-scale interactions between teachers and pupils do not just happen in classrooms but within educational systems” (1995: 12), wider social contexts at the macro level were outside the ambit of this research. This research occurred at a micro level inside a school classroom within the mezzo level of the school and educational system. For the purpose of this research, I have tried to keep this narrow focus, but I am also aware of the wider context and the structural and cultural powers and mechanisms operating outside of this study which impinged on it. Chapter 5 of this thesis dealt with conditions at this level in order to explore the way social and cultural conditions might have impacted on learners’ identities as readers.

This study is based on a New Literacies understanding of reading and writing: that there are multiple literacies; that communities practice different literacies; that children come to school with different dispositions towards texts and different types of texts; that school literacies are one of many possible literacies but are so dominant that they have come to be seen as ‘the norm’; that learners have many different literacies to draw on and use as a means to access the mainstream, or hegemonic school literacies. With this backdrop, this study sought to introduce, what

Heath (1983) might term 'non-mainstream' learners, (those whose home and primary school literacy practices did not include reading many novels) to discourses related to books and of enjoying books in reading clubs. I do not presume that learners had not enjoyed books before or did not have the language to talk about books. Many learners had had some structural means to access books and according to the PIRLS study, and as mentioned at T<sub>1</sub> in Chapter 5, thought reading and schooling was valuable, even if there were few books in the home and little time was spent reading. In learners' reading histories (see 7.3), some spoke of learning to read with 'little books' and library visits as well as some enjoyment of these experiences. However primary schools did not have the material means to continue or sustain book literacies. The reading clubs introduced as a result of this study therefore became sites to practise literacies which drew on what I have termed 'the discourse of the book' alongside other discourses which promoted personal responses to books and enjoyment of them. Chamber's (1996) term 'booktalk' has been used throughout to refer to all responses and engagement with books.

## **8.2 Reading clubs as structures**

Reading clubs were a new structure introduced into the grade 8 English class as a self-selected, learner group to talk about books. They were sites of weekly group meeting within the timetabled language period either in the language teacher's classroom or in the library. As the classroom was crowded with heavy wooden desks, the library offered an alternative flexible space with movable chairs and tables. Materially, structure also includes the reading books to be read and the journals given to learners specifically for reflecting on books. Most of the reading material was sourced within the school itself: the initial graded readers were found in the library; three titles came from the school book room; some titles were purchased for the reading clubs and some copies were donated.

Within this micro level structure, each reading club received a book to read each week. However if none of the learners had completed the book and the group wanted to keep their title for another week, this request was accepted. In Chapters 6 and 7 I showed how learners used the time and space allocated to engage in talking about the books to a group of their peers and to write about their book to an interested other. I now need to consider how they used their agency within the

structure of the reading club. Particularly I would like to focus on their use of the groups for reading and other events, their journal reflection and the library as a space and time for booktalk and book events.

### **8.2.1 Groups**

Allowing learners to organise themselves into groups gave them a sense of agency in the structures they would be part of for the duration of the study. Choosing friends and a group name was an easy but necessary first step in developing the reading clubs. More difficult was engagement with books. Engaging with the structural material of the books needed to be done individually to engage dialogically: group meetings were premised on individuals having read the books so as to be able to contribute to the discussion. Learners exercised their agency to different degrees to 'read' the books. As mentioned previously, many learners had never had a novel to read – though they had read extracts as comprehension exercises and other shorter texts – so 'reading a novel' was not a familiar practice (though, arguably, it is one taken for granted in schools which draw on different social groups for enrolment). So the first act of agency for the reading clubs was for individuals to read their books. From their discussions it would seem that many learners had read – to a greater or lesser extent – the titles given to them so that they could participate in the discussions.

Learners then exercised their agency in directing their reading club discussions. These literacy events (at the level of the Actual) occurred within class and school structures so this was a component of 'school work'. As such, learners who wanted to be seen as 'good students' (i.e. by drawing on what might be termed the 'discourse of the good student') tended to comply with schooling expectations. In this way, schools (to a greater or lesser extent) structured learners into reading club compliance, while, at the same time, learners exercised their agency in the extent and frequency of their reading practice. The degree of booktalk within groups was dependent on learner agency. While I have presented a sample of group recordings, in the main, discussions were not recorded so learners could exercise their agency to talk about books or not. The recordings however, indicate how groups used the time and space to engage in booktalk. The presence of the recording device (as an ICT structure) also impacted on learners' booktalk: on the one hand recording

devices constrained 'natural' speech as learners were aware of being recorded and concerned about how they sounded, but on the other hand these devices enabled groups to exercise their agency in how they presented themselves. Generally, when they were recorded, groups were concerned to give a good account of themselves and their understanding of the books read. Structurally learners had agency to organise their talk and most followed a question and answer format, with one person leading the questions. As there was no formal group leader, the role of the questioner sometimes changed as we saw with the discussions of the *Five Conceited Kids* (when Vusi posed questions to Litha which lead to the voicing of different opinions) and when Nela took over questioning from Pat (in the *Cool Cats'* discussion of *Seedfolks*). So group members exercised agency in the roles they took up within the reading club structures and also in maintaining, dropping or switching roles. Within the reading club discussions, learners had agency in terms of the discourses they drew on in the discussions and whether they used this discourse of the book, or not. These will be discussed later at 8.3.

The micro level reading clubs, within the grade 8 English class, also impacted on the mezzo structures of the school on four specific occasions. Firstly learners were invited to help with a library clean-up and thirteen class members spent a non-school morning (when there were no classes after exams, but schools were not yet on holiday) sorting and re-shelving books. Learners' agency in this event resulted in a cleaner, re-vitalized space within the schooling structures. Secondly, on World Literacy Day the class hosted a book display in the library with different groups taking charge of setting up or packaging the books. Here groups exercised their agency to bid for different areas of responsibility and acted collectively to complete their duties. Reading club structures also impacted on the larger schooling body when the class organised a cake sale to raise funds to purchase additional reading club titles. On this occasion not only were school and class structures brought into alignment but material resources from the home were also mobilized by the learners' agency in this literacy event. Home finances (as a structural emergent property at the level of the Real) together with financial resources of the larger school body, (who came to buy cakes) were activated by reading club agency in this 'cake sale' event at the Actual. As a result of this agency, learners could exert further agency in the selection and purchase of additional reading material. Finally, groups presented

their understandings of their last books to the class at the end of the year and were then invited to repeat their presentations on the occasion of the opening of the library, to an audience of teachers, departmental officials, parents and guests. Groups and individuals therefore exercised their agency within the class reading groups to prepare and present at the micro level and could also exercise their agency to present at the mezzo level.

### **8.2.2 Journal writing**

As discussed in Chapter 7, journals were introduced as another structure within the reading club structures. Like reading the books, writing required individual agency. However the group structure enabled the management of the journals, as it did the weekly allocation and collection of the novels being read. At a structural level, journal writing was used to enhance reading club discussions (as learners could prepare by writing notes to share with the group) and to engage in book talk on an individual basis with me. The examples from the journals in the previous chapter show how, in their initial writing, learners used their agency in relation to *how much* they wrote as well as in *what* they wrote about. Some of the examples demonstrate learners' agency in writing about different titles (by Lilla in the Tigers) and in writing general reflections in the form of 'first order commentaries' on the process of reading (by Jackie in the Contagious Kids). Generally girls exercised more agency to write in journals than boys, as indicated in Table 4.3, in Chapter 4, (twenty-two girls wrote a total of 565 pages whereas ten boys wrote a total on 169 pages). This greater involvement of girls in literacy events is in line with national and international trends as indicated in the PIRLS 2006 report. This could be related to the way girls are socially and culturally conditioned into more compliant positions than boys in many social groups. Where that social and cultural conditioning, as in the case of the reading clubs in this study, involved reading and writing, then broader engagement of the girls with journaling can be better understood. It could also be related to a perception of writing as a gendered practice. In their final interviews, the Cool Cats' boys, Adam and Manyano, commented that they were initially reluctant to journal as they thought it was a 'girls' thing', but then found the process of writing helpful to their thinking and so recommended this practice. Other boys may have shared a gendered understanding of journal writing, hence their reluctance to write.

Besides learners' agency in what they chose to write and the quantity they wrote, was their agency in *how* they wrote. Jackie's journal entries showed how she moved between conversation positions with me and a more 'academic' second order monitoring. A number of the learners, mainly girls, exercised their agency in the open, personal structure of the journals to address me directly: some requested particular books, some made suggestions for debates or other class activities, and some apologized for their lack of writing. Others used their agency not to write at all. Generally, by the end of the reading club process, through their ongoing agency in the practice of journal writing, learners were writing up to three and four pages, though admittedly this was somewhat uneven. Those who did exercise their agency to comment more regularly on the reading club books, or other books in the case of Lilla from the Tigers, took up a more literary stance over the duration of the reading clubs. Others, besides Jackie, used the journal as a form of 'running commentary' towards the end of the process. This practice seemed to be associated with *Seedfolks* as a means of tracking the different characters that were presented. Most learners used their journal writing to reflect and extend their 'discourse of the book' with few exercising their agency in to write 'first-order commentaries' as seen in Jackie's journal entries. The quotations from the learners' final journal reflections, that introduce this chapter, indicate their second-order commentaries and provide a glimpse of their experiences of reading clubs.

Writing and reading complement each other and both need on-going practice. Structurally, regular opportunities to engage in both of these practices were built into the reading club process. The development in Jackie's journal writing was significant. Firstly, it illustrates the benefits of her exercising her agency to practise writing over time. It helped that she enjoyed the books – as did many of the other learners – but reading alone was not sufficient. So, writing was a regular event, as was feedback. I would argue that the feedback too was motivating: I was really interested in what she thought about the books, which in turn encouraged both her reading and writing. If reading clubs are to occur in language classes, teachers need to be willing to commit to on-going responses to learners' writing, though both might be outside the prescriptions of the new CAPS programme introduced into the South African education system. Secondly, I would suggest that Jackie's writing improved because she was exposed to regular examples of good writing in her reading. On-going

engagement with texts in which there was correct spelling, clear sentences, ideas divided into paragraphs, development of ideas or a narrative over a period, provided models of what writing could, and should be like. As in the chunks of talk that became extended in the process of the reading clubs with the Five Conceited Kids, so the chunks of writing in journals also became more extended as learners began to substantiate their claims with textual details.

### 8.2.3 Library

The library can be understood as a literacy resource within the structure of the school. Access to this space for reading club discussions during English classes offered opportunities for different configurations and 'ways of being' to those in a classroom regimented by rows of wooden desks. Despite the old and dusty books, it was recognised by all as a literacy space even if it had not functioned as one.

In addition to a regular *reading club space*, the library functioned as a type of '*third space*' (Moje *et al.*, 2004) where learners could draw on different discourses within the formal schooling structure. It was fortuitous that there was no librarian at that time, as this absence enabled the creation of this alternative 'third space'. This was especially the case with the informal booktalk that occurred during break-times when learners exercised their agency to use this space to visit me. The booktalk that resulted ranged from the reading, or not, of specific books – as evidenced in Linda's 'reading' of *Great Expectations* – to searches for 'Shakespeares to read', to comments about family literacy values and practices. Many also borrowed books. In using this space at break times, learners demonstrated an *affinity identity* (Gee, 2006) as they exercised their agency to be there in their free time. In addition, on a micro level, the library was also a space for the development of discourse identities. A *discourse* perspective of identity, or *D-identity*, is formed by how others talk about us and the character traits or abilities they choose to speak about. Hence the example at 6.3.1, of Velile, in the Youth Representatives, ascribing a reading identity to his friend Linda and so borrowing *Great Expectations* for her to read. Other library visitors, in their engagement in booktalk, recommended books to friends, and in so doing recognised them as readers in these informal conversations. So, at the micro level of the informal conversations within library structures, *affinity* and *discoursal identities* as readers began to emerge.

At the school, or mezzo level, the library became the site where the reading clubs engagement with reading, became more visible. As mentioned earlier, the library was the site for agency to be exercised specifically to effect literacy events. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Gee's understanding of identity involves "being recognised as a certain "kind of person" in a given context" (2000: 99). How others see us is therefore central to this view of identity as identities are constructed, to some extent, within organisations and institutions and through interactions with other people. Because reading club events spilled over into school settings, with events such as library clean-ups, book displays and book fundraising as mentioned earlier, the wider school body and even the community came to see these learners as readers. The school accorded them an *institutional identity* as readers. In their involvement with school-wide book events, as well as their on-going reading club activities in class, learners displayed an affinity with books so could be seen to be part of an affinity group with an *affinity-type identity* as a reader. Because the class's participation with reading and book events was recognised throughout the school, they were spoken about as readers, to the extent that when the school library was being opened, these grade 8 reading club groups were the only learners invited, and demonstrated their literary understandings to an impressed audience. This could be seen as an overlap between *discourse*, *affinity* and *institutional* identities which added to their 'growing sense of self' as readers, in Archerian terms.

In this study, Gee's (2000b) types of identities provided a useful heuristic to understand how learners saw themselves, or were seen by others. This provided a means to analyse learners' talk and behaviour in relation to books and literary events. As identities are fluid and evolve in response to different contexts, so the learners' identities as readers in this study continued to grow and change. Honing Gee's (2000b) original framework proved fruitful in recognising how discourses position and structure learners as readers, or not.

Reading club practices and events were not limited to the English classroom. Instead the structure of reading clubs meant learners carried books home and were seen with their reading club books in taxis and in the street, so these learners could be seen to be people who read books. As learners moved between class, school and home contexts so they slipped into different identity categories which depend on social interaction and recognition by others. Within Gee's framework, identities are socially constructed, so the perception of others is central to learners being seen as

readers. Restricting books and the practice of reading to the English classroom would have denied learners this wider social construction as readers

### **8.3 Reading clubs and the domain of culture**

In addition to exercising their agency in the structural domain, learners also exercised agency in the cultural domain. This exercise of agency was particularly marked in the way learners chose to draw on discourses to aid their understandings of the novels they were reading. My analysis of the data in Chapters 6 and 7, identifies a range of discourses. I have chosen to focus on three as particularly constraining or enabling, namely: ‘the discourse of the boring book’, ‘the discourse of the moral lesson’ and ‘the discourse of the book’. First of these was ‘the discourse of the boring book’. This seemed to be an initial judgment, often as an alternative to ‘the discourse of the interesting book’. This emerged in the Cool Cats’ discussions when Nela asked the group whether *Seedfolks* was ‘boring or interesting’. It was also evident when groups discussed possible titles to purchase for the reading clubs. From looking at the covers and ‘blurbs’ groups had to make recommendations to the class and these were the most common distinguishing categories – as they are for many people. As young learners with few experiences of reading books, these are normal terms to use, especially in the immediacy of conversation. With the Five Conceited Kids however, ‘the discourse of the boring book’ was used indulgently as a final comment on a book, thus constraining discussion of any nuance or interesting detail. In contrast, the Contagious Kids with Jackie, and the Cool Cats with Pat, expected more in terms ‘favourite parts’ or personal responses and so by-passed this potential road-block.

‘The discourse of the moral lesson’ was quite pervasive. It was evident in all the Five Conceited Kids’ discussions and was touched on with the Cool Cats, though the Tigers and Contagious Kids did not use it. It also emerged in the final journal writing where learners were asked to comment on the book or character they would always remember. The two that chose *Whitney’s Kiss*, which was read in class, did so because “the book is a life lesson story” with advice about choices and “sex before the time” as well to “never keep secrets and listen to elder’s advice” – all lessons which would delight any parent. So parents and teachers, especially those involved in religious literacies, value ‘the discourse of the moral lesson’, which sets standards of behaviour in accessible ‘story-like’ texts, thus reinforcing the home and church

messages. Learners draw on these practices and assess novels from the moral lessons that are offered. Thus their responses are constrained. While schools should, and do, support 'the discourse of the moral lesson', I would argue that it is only one of the discourses that learners should be able to draw on. Part of the DoE curriculum is to be critical, which this discourse seems to avoid. Not all books could, or should, be reduced to a moral lesson: this was often not the writer's intention and this focus ignores all other literary elements. If learners only read for moral lessons, they are being denied access to other ways of being a reader and appreciating other literacies. Arguably, they are also conditioned into a specific relationship with the author of the text. The author comes to occupy a didactic position and the reader one of receiving and accepting the 'lesson'. However, for those who have little access to different literacies or varied reading material, the 'moral lesson' is a valuable 'hook' to make reading meaningful. Schools and teachers need the material resources of a range of varied books, if they want to engage learners and immerse them in a repertoire of literacy practices, including those which draw on more 'critical' literacies – that is, on literacies which allow the reader to draw on other texts, background knowledge and life experience to challenge the text they are reading. Such criticality is key to the academic literacies of the university.

Running alongside the various discourses that learners brought to the reading clubs was the use of 'the discourse of the book'. This was the meta-language of booktalk that provided learners with a framework to engage in discussions. It was supported by 'the discourse of the personal response' as both involved an appreciation, to some extent, of some elements of *plot*, *characters* or *setting*, for example. In the discussions of the Five Conceited Kids in Chapter 6, the learners drew on alternative discourses related to popular culture and more specifically to those related to 'cool youth culture' which seemed to be particularly meaningful to them. These learners used their agency in the reading club to enact radio and 'DJ' roles by taking on rap personae, using these as forms of address throughout the first two reading club recording events, and even singing a rap song. This *enactment* demonstrated their membership of the Discourse of the radio DJ as an identity; it was a strongly held way of behaving, thinking and interacting (Gee, 2008). It is possible that the fact that they were being recorded contributed to the emergence of this Discourse as they could play back the recording to hear their presentation of themselves. So the presence of a recorder contributed to the radio DJ Discourse which competed with

the school-based Discourse which drew on 'the discourse of the book' introduced into the reading clubs. Gee (2008: 3) recognises that we are members of many Discourses and have many "socially situated identities" which are fluid and evolving and sometimes in conflict. The discussions of the Five Conceited Kids, illustrate the conflicts experienced by learners. Litha and Toni seemed to be able to engage in booktalk while maintaining their radio alter egos as 'Sweetness' and the 'Optimal Kid' while Noli and Nandipha challenged the alternative Discourse involving booktalk. In the last recording, although there was more focus on booktalk, the resilience of Radio DJ Discourse was still evident in Litha's closing remark "That's a wrap".

Gee (2008) suggests that learners cannot be taught literacies. Instead they need to acquire these by being immersed in the practice of literacy, ideally with the support of an experienced mentor. In the reading clubs learners could exercise their agency to engage with the literacy practices being promoted or not. They could also choose which discourses to draw on to make sense of their reading in a personally relevant way while gradually taking up the discourse of the book. Because these reading clubs occurred within larger educational structures, learners were already disposed to engage with the cultural elements, in the form of discourses at the level of the Real.

#### **8.4 Shifts, or not?**

This was a small scale study of a particular group of learners who brought their own literacy experiences to the reading clubs. As such I cannot claim that the process lead to these learners becoming readers. Instead this process offered learners scaffolded opportunities to engage with books and draw on their own, and school discourses as meaning-making resources. For the most part these learners exercised their agency within reading club structures to explore 'the discourse of the book' which, in terms of the framework used for this study, is located in the domain of culture at the level of the Real. Some exercised their agency to participate sporadically or to engage in discussions but not journal writing or to read, or not, the books on offer. The data indicates the participation of most of the learners to different degrees but all had shifted from initial notes to longer prose entries in their journal writing. For some, writing had become a means to explore their thinking about books: for others, writing was still an effort but had become easier.

For some learners, 'the discourse of the book' was familiar and so they could more easily take this up in discussions and writing. Some drew on 'teacherly' or 'moral lesson' discourses in addition to 'the discourse of the book'. Others brought contesting discourses as was seen with the Five Conceited Kids. The reading club structure allowed the learners agency in the cultural resources they used. Reading club structures allowed learners opportunities to display and share their repertoires of reading as a means for the group to negotiate their responses to the book. Recordings of discussions and journal writing revealed how learners made sense of their reading and the resources they used in doing so. So I was able to see and understand the multiple literacies learners brought to the reading club process and avoid measuring their literacy with a test – useful as that might be.

### **8.5 Limitations and recommendations**

Reading clubs are one mechanism that could bridge learners' home and community literacies with those of the school. Ideally this would happen within smaller school classes or with a literacy coach or assistant so that learners could get more recognition and support. In this case, the class size was a limitation and while this was not insurmountable, it might be daunting for some teachers. If education is going to be equal, or offer working class children real opportunities, then these schools and teachers need the resources, in this case suitable books, necessary for them to practice reading, as well as smaller classes. Lack of resources did limit our engagement with books but did not block them. Some of the books were only added to the pool towards the end of the year which meant that few groups had an opportunity to read them then – though hopefully they could read them the following year. Graded readers and trade books were enjoyed equally and, contrary to the advice of McMahan and Raphael (1997), I would recommend graded readers as a stepping stone to developing independent confident readers. These books of forty to fifty pages gave learners a sense of accomplishment with simplified accessible stories and many, like *David Copperfield*, *The boy who was afraid*, and *Rainman*, were mentioned as books or characters that would always be remembered – as were the trade books, *Hatchet* and *Tomorrow when the war began*.

Expecting learners who had never had a book, to read a book a week by themselves, albeit concise, graded readers, has its own limitations. If, in learners' reading trajectories, literary texts were read aloud by the teachers or by

class members in class, independent reading may have been outside their literacy practices. If, as Felix, Dornbrack & Scheckle (2008) found, homework practices are irregular in schools serving 'Black' and 'Coloured' communities, then the learners are unlikely to complete reading and writing by themselves, especially as no marks were given. With all these considerations, learners probably needed more support and scaffolding to better take up the reading of books. Meeting learners once a week for reading club, meant I had limited time to engage with learners about possible challenges they had with reading the assigned text or with writing responses. While I could have focused on selected learners or groups for the purpose of research, I was wary of excluding any of the groups and I did not know at the outset which would offer the most interesting insights. Including all of the learners served to unite the class in the reading club experience and also in the school-level events, like book displays and cake sales. I also felt that if I were to advocate reading clubs as a literacy intervention in underserved schools, in which classes of forty learners is normal, I could have a better understanding of possible challenges if I had also worked with that number. Therefore, although working intensively with forty learners was challenging, these are the conditions that face most teachers every day.

Teachers or researchers, who would like to replicate this study, would need to adapt it to the exigencies of each individual context. What could be replicated is the group discussion around books and subsequent individual reflection on what was read and discussed. An investment in developing literacies is a long-term project and the teacher or researcher would need to recognise that not all novels will be enjoyed by all learners: instead learners should be encouraged to engage differently and widen their repertoire of reading practices. This could include drawing on the literacy practices that learners have brought from homes, communities and primary schools and building on these while engaging with the meta-language of literary analysis. Ideally, learners would then be able to experience Freebody and Luke's (1990) resources model and different "ways of participating in one's social role as a reader" (Freebody, 1992: 2) Schools with limited resources would need to be creative and enterprising in using whatever sets of books they may have and could approach Biblionef or the Reading Association of South Africa, RASA for assistance. While the teacher-researcher may not be interested in structural, cultural or identity shifts, a focus on language learning and especially developing confident writers would be a

worthwhile educational endeavour and would make a reading club intervention focussed and manageable.

In some ways, reading a book a week or every two weeks might have been a bit rushed in that learners did not always have sufficient time to engage in each text before they were expected to exchange books. In this way it may have benefited those who already had more experience of book literacy, whereas those who had little experience of reading books independently might have benefitted from more support and orientation to new texts. If I had been with the class more, I might have been able to respond to individual needs and to support struggling groups more. The advantage of the regular exchange was that if groups were not enjoying a book, they could exercise their agency to swap it for a different title. Knowing they had a week to read also meant learners began to read more regularly in order to be ready to discuss with their groups.

These were young readers who were finding their way in a somewhat unfamiliar world of books, using past experiences and current resource and their own eagerness to learn and explore. For them, the reading club was an attractive alternative to usual ways of being a learner and to engage with a somewhat exotic outsider – a previous grade 8 English teacher had told me the learners would listen to me as I was white! While this may have been a contributing factor, and something I have no control of; it does not take away from these learners' eagerness to read and their interest in books. While another class at another time might have reacted very differently, I would recommend grade 8 as a suitable moment in learners' reading trajectory, to engage in the world of books, as a specific literacy practice.

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## **APPENDIX A: Consent forms**

## APPENDIX A1: Consent form for learners

J12  
North Campus  
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan  
University  
Port Elizabeth  
6031

1 May 2011

Dear Learners and Parents/ Guardians

### RESEARCH IN READING WITH GRADE 8 LEARNERS

My name is Eileen Scheckle and I will be researching grade 8 reading at your school. The research will be supervised by Professor Chrissie Boughey at Rhodes University. I lecture in the Applied Languages Department at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) here in Port Elizabeth and I have helped with reading at Bay High School since 2007.

As you know, reading is important at all levels of school and in all subjects. With outcomes Based Education, and now CAPS, learners have had different experiences of reading. I will be working with your child's English teacher in exploring reading skills and reading confidence.

To do this research I will need to record learners' discussions on the books we read together in class or in the library. In addition I would like to interview some learners to hear their reading background and what they normally read and get their responses in a notebook I will give them.

All the reading materials will be provided at school and this will take place in normal English periods.

I need permission from learners and their parents for learners to be recorded and to write responses for me. The names of the learners, the teacher and the school will not be used in my work.

If you have any questions, I am happy to come to the school to answer them.

I would appreciate it if you could complete the attached form and give it back to the English teacher as soon as possible.

Regards

Eileen Scheckle (041 5043444)

Cell: 0826824074

[Eileen.scheckle@nmmu.ac.za](mailto:Eileen.scheckle@nmmu.ac.za)

**Consent Form: Tape-recording and notes in notebook**

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I, parent/ guardian of ..... (learner's name) of

'Bay' High School, give permission for my son/ daughter / grandchild / stepchild / family member to participate in Eileen Scheckle's reading research and to be tape-recorded at school.

I have read the information letter to the learners and their parents or guardians, and understand that the researcher wants to see what the learners think about what they have read at school.

I agree that:

- I understand the aims of this research and that there will be no danger involved.
- **As a learner**, my comments in class and in the notebook can be used by Eileen.
- **As a parent** or guardian, I allow my child / children to participate in this research.
- I understand that the findings will be used for research purposes and may be reported in journals but no actual names of the school, teachers or learners will be used.
- I am free to withdraw my consent at any time.

**Signature Parent:** .....

**Signature Learner**.....

Date .....

---

Eileen Scheckle ( Tel 041 – 504 3444)

## APPENDIX A2: Consent form to teacher

J12  
North Campus  
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan  
University  
Port Elizabeth  
6031

1 May 2011

Dear

### RESEARCH IN READING WITH GRADE 8 LEARNERS

I would like to request your permission to conduct research with grade 8 learners to understand their reading practices. The research will be supervised by Professor Chrissie Boughey at Rhodes University. I lecture in the Applied Languages Department at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) here in Port Elizabeth and, as you know, I have helped with reading at Bay High School since 2007.

The research will take the form of weekly reading clubs in the grade 8 English classroom, or in the school library, with the help of the grade 8 English teacher.

I do not foresee any dangers for the learners involved and am happy to work with volunteers only and those whose parents give permission for their children to participate.

I will respect the privacy of the school and use a pseudonym for the school and not use any names to identify the staff, learners or school.

I would also like your consent to be interviewed as part of this research.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Regards  
Eileen Scheckle (041 5043444)  
Cell: 0826824074  
[Eileen.scheckle@nmmu.ac.za](mailto:Eileen.scheckle@nmmu.ac.za)

## Consent Form: Research at Bay High School

---

I, ..... Principal of 'Bay' High School give permission for Eileen Scheckle to conduct research into reading clubs at Bay High School during 2011 and to interview me as part of her research.

I have read the information letter, and understand that the researcher wants to see how the learners experience the reading materials what they think about these materials and activities.

I acknowledge that:

- The aims, methods and anticipated benefits have been explained to me.
- This is research towards her PhD and there is no guarantee of reading improvement.
- Learners, with their parents' consent, are free to be recorded and write their comments in notebooks for the researcher to use
- I understand that the findings will be used for research purposes and may be reported in journals but no actual names of the school, teachers or learners will be used.
- The teachers, learners and myself are free to withdraw our consent at any time, in which event our participation in the research project will immediately cease and any information from us will not be used.

**Signature** .....

Date .....

---

Eileen Scheckle ( Tel 041 – 504 3444)

## APPENDIX A3: Consent form to principal

J12  
North Campus  
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan  
University  
Port Elizabeth  
6031

1 May 2011

Dear

### RESEARCH IN READING WITH GRADE 8 LEARNERS

I would like to request your permission to conduct research with grade 8 learners in your English class to understand their reading practices. The research will be supervised by Professor Chrissie Boughey at Rhodes University. I lecture in the Applied Languages Department at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) here in Port Elizabeth and, as you know, I have helped with reading at Bay High School since 2007.

The research will take the form of weekly reading clubs which will be conducted in the grade 8 English classroom, or in the school library,.

I do not foresee any dangers for the learners involved and am happy to work with volunteers only and those whose parents give permission for their children to participate.

I will respect the privacy of the school and use a pseudonym for the school and not use any names to identify the staff, learners or school.

I would also like your consent to be interviewed as part of this research.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Regards  
Eileen Scheckle (041 5043444)  
Cell: 0826824074  
[Eileen.scheckle@nmmu.ac.za](mailto:Eileen.scheckle@nmmu.ac.za)

## Consent Form: Research at Bay High School

---

I, ..... teacher at 'Bay' High School give permission for Eileen Scheckle to conduct research into reading clubs in my English class at Bay High School during 2011 and to interview me as part of her research.

I have read the information letter, and understand that the researcher wants to see how the learners experience the reading materials what they think about these materials and activities.

I acknowledge that:

- The aims, methods and anticipated benefits have been explained to me.
- This is research towards her PhD and there is no guarantee of reading improvement.
- Learners, with their parents' consent, are free to be recorded and write their comments in notebooks for the researcher to use
- I understand that the findings will be used for research purposes and may be reported in journals but no actual names of the school, teachers or learners will be used.
- I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, in which event my participation in the research project will immediately cease and any information will not be used.

**Signature** .....

Date .....

---

Eileen Scheckle ( Tel 041 – 504 3444)

## APPENDIX B: Transcript example of Cool Cats' discussion of *Seedfolks*

### EXAMPLE OF READING CLUB TRANSCRIPT

#### Cool Cats on *Seedfolks* 4 August (9:23)

Pat: We read the *Seedfolks*.

Nela: Mmmhmm

Pat: I'm Patricia and I'm asking, who was the main character?

Bonny: Right now we don't have any idea as there's a lot of different characters in the book.

Nela: I think it's Kim

Manyano: Why Kim?

Nela: Because, she's the one who got the first idea about the garden and stuff.

Pat: Manyano?

Manyano: I think it's Kim

Pat: Adam?

Adam: I also think it's Kim

Pat: Ok. so..

Nela: Who do you think it is?

Pat: Kim. So who is this Kim?

Bonny: Kim is this other Asian or Chinese girl who lost her father and she could garden exactly like her father, when she, ..

Pat: So, she's fatherless,

Nela: Mmmhmm

Pat: She's a teenage girl

Nela: Mmmhmm

Pat: And she's in a mission

Bonny: Mmhuh?

Pat: I think she in a mission to find out who she is..

Bonny: Ja,

Nela: And you Manyano, what do you think?

Man: Ja ja ja

Pat: Of course, she's a teenager, every teenager goes through a phase where they want to know who they are, and they want to know who they want to be like

Bonny: Ja

Pat: So I think..

Bonny: I also agree on that.

Pat: So where was the setting?

Manyano: It's Cleveland

Nela: In America

Manyano: I think it's America

Pat: Ok, so is it rural, urban?"

Bonny: I want to say it's, urban.

Nela: Ja

Pat: Urban ja. ok what kind of urban then?

Bonny: There's flats, apartments and it includes farming

Pat: Farming, Ok. So, the other characters, how do you feel about the book?

Bonny: it's not the kind of a book I would read though  
 Manyano: Definitely not Yoh!  
 Pat: I think this book. So what do you think of the title, the title, *Seedfolks*?  
 Adam: *Seedfolks*  
 Bab: *Seedfolks*  
 Nela: Like when you hear the name what do you think?  
 Pat: Ja, what do you think in your mind when you?  
 Manyano: I think I hear Ubuntu  
 Bonny: I hear farming when I hear the word *seed* I hear farming. And when I look at the cover and the pictures.  
 Nela: Mmmhmm  
 Bonny: Folks. It's about digging I think  
 Pat: Digging  
 Bonny: Folks. Seed Folks  
 Pat: Ok, so I think.... do you think the title relates to the book?  
 Bonny: Yes I do.  
 Adam & Manyano: Ja  
 Nela: It does. Definitely yes  
 Pat: So, umm what's the most umm, precious, umm, moment of the story?  
 Bonny: Ok It's when this other guy, I've forgot his name. It was like, umm, when he planted umm,  
 Manyano: Tomatoes  
 Bonny: tomatoes to get back his girlfriend  
 Adam: That was really  
 Pat: Romantic  
 Nela: sweet, romantic hahah  
 Bonny: It's romantic  
 Laughs  
 Bonny: I think his name was Chokka or something  
 Pat: Ja. Ok. And, umm, what is the most saddest thing?  
 Bonny: When Kim lost her father, obviously  
 Nela: And the second part was, umm, when the lettuce died because of the sun.  
 Manyano: Ja. That was one.  
 Adam: Ja  
 Pat: Mmm. And the book in itself? Do you think, do you think umm, who were the target audience of this, story?  
 Bonny: Umm. Definitely definitely Kim, coz she's the one who started  
 Pat: No the target. Who something was, who was inclined to read it?  
 Manyano: I think it's our grandparents  
 laughter  
 Pat: No. Because the author, the author writes teenage books. And I think this one is a teenage book because first of all, he started with Kim  
 Nela: Mmmm  
 Pat: So obviously it must be a teenage book, and the umm, interesting thing is that he added, he added old people so like it started from young to old. So it shows, then  
 Nela: Ja I get you, I get you.  
 Pat: But what I think about the book, I think this whole book. How I summarise it, it's about a community full of insolation and stereotypes  
 Nela: Mmmhmm

Pat: and its about farming, and it's a community that does not talk to each other. This community is diverse and has foreigners from other countries, but finally what I like is that the Ubuntu comes back and everybody starts talking to each other and they really paint an important role of what is a community

Nela: Can I ask you something?

Pat: And everyone kind of forgets their differences and comes back together united.

Nela: Can I ask you something?

Pat: Mmmhmm

Nela: What brought them together? The garden.....

Pat : I think what brought them together, it was the garden, and also that, umm, there was umm, these Mexican guys, coz Mexicans like to party you know, so these Mexican guys went to this house of this Mexican guy and kind of started, like you know, a gathering like, a get-together and they were having fun so others kind of like, wanted to go there, so they took what they had and they went there, and they just, that's where

Nela: came together

Pat: and, happy ending and I think I love the book.

Bonny: haha I don't like it

Pat: The more I talk about it it inspires me

Nela: Ok. When you first read the book, guys, guys when you first read the book, like first pages, what did you think? Was this book boring or interesting?

Pat: I think it, Ok, talk Adam

Adam: It was interesting, the first part, but in the middle laughs

Manyano Ja, confusing

Adam: You kind of get lost

Bonny: I think all these characters have different stories,

Nela: Mmm

Pat: but you know what, you know one thing is, they're linked, even though they seem different they all come together in one umm, topic. So, I think , also the old people talk about how they came in the, and how the area was like and the young people tell their stories about their daily lives, so...Did it come into your mind? What did you learn about the book?

Pause

Manyano: It's never lose Ubuntu

Pat: Ja, and?

Nela: You are the same no matter what.. how

Manyano: how different you are

Nela: How do I say this?

Pat: You're the same, it doesn't matter about

Nela: About your cultures

Pat: Ja, it doesn't matter how different you are, first of all you are a human being, then become

Nela: We're all made by the same person

Bonny: Ja. Our holy creator

Adam: Are we done?

Manyano: No we're not done

Pat: No the rate

Nela: yes I was going to ask that

Manyano: I give it 4 out of 10

Pat: haha why 4?

Nela Why 4?

Manyano: Coz its boring

Pat: so what kind of books do you like?

Manyano: Action

Pat: Action. Ok. We're all entitled to our own opinions. Mmm What do you think Adam?

Adam: 5

Nela: Ok. And you?

Bonny: 5

Nela: And you?

Pat: I think I'll give it a 7

Manyano: Because you were inspired by the book

Pat: I was inspired by the book

Nela I'll give it a 6 because I love teenage books because the things that we face..

Pat: are in there,

Nela: Ja, are in there, like. Ja. It's kind of nice, it's kind of cool

Bonny: Cool

Manyano: It's kind of nice, not cool

Adam: Whispering Are we done?

Manyano: No we're not done

Laughs

Bonny: Cut

Nela: Done

Laughs

Manyano: Signing off

Laughs

Nela: This is the

Bonny: Cool cats,

Nela: Cool cats signing off