

MEDIATING MEANING IN BOOKTALK: READING CLUBS AS THIRD SPACES

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ABSTRACT

Various studies have shown that South Africa has low levels of school literacy. This is exacerbated when schools are located in low socioeconomic settings where schools have a dearth of book resources to develop literacy practices or literary engagement. This article reports on a qualitative study of classroom reading clubs where learners read novels in groups once a week. In particular, it focuses on discussions within two reading clubs to explore how learners took up different positions in talking about books and how they constructed a shared understanding. The study shows how through talking, learners have an opportunity to think and this thinking is made visible to researchers. In their reading club discussions, learners can appropriate and approximate the metalanguage of booktalk while building reading 'stamina'. The article suggests that in historically disadvantaged schools, classroom reading clubs can become sites where reading strategies and reasoning in response to literature can be developed. The opportunities afforded by reading clubs, therefore, constitute an attempt to redress inequities in education and contribute to social justice.

KEYWORDS: reading clubs, booktalk, social justice, dialogism, reading stamina

INTRODUCTION

Reading clubs offer learners a space to engage in reading practices and develop their literacies around the books they read. This is especially important in resource-poor educational and community contexts with a dearth of reading material. Reading clubs were introduced into a grade 8 English class in a dual medium, formerly segregated, urban high school in South Africa. grade 8 teachers had reported decreasing literacy skills in new intakes of learners over several years and had requested help with addressing this situation. This study took place against a backdrop of disparities in the South African education landscape as highlighted by the international Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and outlined by Chetty (2019). Many schools do not have libraries or books to read to develop a reading culture, even in language classrooms. Thus, opportunities to access books and talk about them with peers or interested others are not available in many schools. The introduction of classroom reading clubs was a means to address this gap.

From a sociocultural perspective, reading and writing are practices that happen within contexts, utilising particular texts to achieve a purpose (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000). Children experience texts in various ways throughout primary school and in their homes and communities.

They bring these literacy practices to high school and consequently, in their first year of high school, a grade 8 class may contain learners with varying experiences with texts. Reading clubs were a means to provide a common literary experience while practising book literacy and allowing learners space to respond personally to a text. Learners need extensive practice and support to become critical readers (Fjällström & Kokkola, 2015; Nikolajeva, 2010), as well as many texts to engage with as they develop this orientation. In addition, they need many opportunities to practice reading books for enjoyment and thus build reading stamina (Fisher & Frey 2018) by reading longer texts. Increased volume of reading can contribute to academic success (Whitten, Labby & Sullivan, 2016) and the development of empathy (Jocius & Shealy, 2017) while building resilience. Learners at poorly resourced schools or from low socioeconomic backgrounds, both in South Africa and internationally, may have limited access to books (Howie, Combrink, Tshele, Roux, McLeod Palane & Mokoena, 2017; Thaba-Nkadimene & Emsley, 2020; Chetty, 2019). This paper will argue that reading clubs provide opportunities to read widely and engage personally with texts. As such, reading club interactions formed a type of third space to draw on out-of-school reading in a supportive and dedicated classroom context. This study of reading clubs in a low-resource setting focused on answering the research question: How did learners engage with books in their reading club discussions? In this article, I will draw on the reading club discussions to show how grade 8 learners take up the spaces of reading clubs to discuss the books they read and in doing so, begin to appropriate the dominant literacies (Janks, 2009) of schools. Talking about books is central to understanding them (Snow, 2014) and through the dialogue of reading club talk, learners shared their responses and mulled over questions posed by the group. In this way, reading clubs can be spaces for learners to mediate meaning together and build on each other's contributions.

This paper will briefly present how literacy in low socioeconomic settings does not align with school literacies, before unpacking the notion of third space, particularly in relation to educational contexts. This sets up the context for understanding what is meant by reading clubs and what they might offer learners as they develop a reading identity. That is followed by two examples of book talk, one an initial meeting and a later discussion to explore how learners participate and the roles and literacies they drew on in their discussions. This provides the basis for an exploration of talk and the roles and affordances of talk in the reading club space.

LITERACY AND LOW-RESOURCE SCHOOLS

A sociocultural understanding of literacy means there are different forms of literacy in different contexts and that literacy practices reflect how literacies are used to achieve goals. School literacy is only one of many kinds of literacy practices but has become normalised which in the process, devalues other literacies that are practised in homes and communities (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). Studies in South Africa (Howie et al, 2017; Thaba-Ndikame & Emsley, 2020) and internationally (Comber, 2015; Whitten et al., 2016) document how children from low socioeconomic backgrounds do not perform as well in tests of literacy and numeracy. While poverty brings its own challenges, this is exacerbated when schools serving these communities are themselves poor

in literacy resources (Chetty, 2019). This is particularly the case for many township schools in South Africa with few book resources. These literacy-poor environments continue into high schools where school literacy practices may not include personal reading or reading for pleasure, both of which contribute to developing success in deriving meaning from texts (Whitten et al., 2016; Fisher & Frey, 2018). According to the PIRLS reports (Howie et al, 2017), schools and homes in low socioeconomic status communities are less likely to have books and practices of reading for pleasure, yet the trajectory of students in English home language classes is to engage with literary texts from the canon, such as *Pride and Prejudice* or *The Great Gatsby* in their final year at school. Academic success is based on the dominant school literacy of engaging with literature but many schools do not have the resources for learners to develop this form of schooled literacy.

THIRD SPACE THEORIES

Due to the gap between home and school literacies and the need for these to inform and build on each other, a bridge between these different practices is needed. Third space theories offer possibilities for understanding hybrid practices of, in this case, literacy and also allow both a physical and mental space to engage in literacy differently in the form of reading clubs, which will be discussed in a later section. Therefore, third space theories offer alternative spaces of possibility for the co-construction of knowledge and the negotiation of meaning. These in-between spaces, betwixt home and school or between different practices of literacy, are essentially sites for drawing on the different repertoires of learning or literacy, which eschews any dominant practice. Various conceptions of third space suggest how this theory can accommodate and build on diversity.

Bhabha (1994) suggests that an exploration of the third space may help us ‘to elude the politics of polarity’ (39) and allow other aspects of ourselves to emerge. The notion of third space recognises this as a space of possibility where participants can draw on different discourses to generate hybridity in avoidance of binary oppositions. Bhabha suggests that the ‘production of meaning’ requires that both present time and specific space be mobilised through a third space (1994, 36). Accordingly, the construction of meaning that occurs within third spaces is a result of ideas-in-time (37) as well as self-reflection. This suggests that ideas and symbols are not fixed or unitary but can be ‘appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew’ (37).

Within an educational context, theories of third space offer a means of recognising different ways of participating in learning (Pahl & Kelly, 2005) and in particular, exploring the continuities between home and school literacy practices (Levy, 2008). Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo and Collazo (2004) suggest that there are discontinuities between home and community knowledge bases; especially those of the school if learners come from different contexts and backgrounds. So, in the reading club third space, as learners talk in groups, they can mobilise their home literacies as they navigate talking about books.

READING CLUBS AS LITERARY SPACES

Context is critical in understanding literacy practices since each practice develops in response to particular social, economic and political conditions (Street, 1984). Within the reading clubs, I was interested in the interpersonal, socially conditioned aspects of literacy, in order to understand how learners make sense of their book reading. As reading clubs became sites for social practices of literacy, learners became more proficient at participating in group discussions as they became more confident in owning and driving the discussions and became more critically engaged (Jocius et al., 2017). Reading clubs were sites to participate in book literacy, develop a personal response to the novels, read and try out the metalanguage of what Chambers (1996) calls *booktalk*, in safe reading club spaces. Consequently, engagement with books needed to become a social practice within the class structure and thus, booktalk became a form of situated literacy (Barton et al., 2000) as a space to share book responses by talking about them. Chambers suggests that booktalk, as a compound, is a recognition of the multiple ways in which children respond to what they have read and that they often only understand their reading after having spoken about it in a form of *booktalk*.

Many researchers attest to the power of talk in developing thinking (Mercer, 2000) and internalising learning (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2020), especially among second language learners (Boyd & Kong, 2017; Thaba-Nkadimane & Maletsema, 2020). Snow (2014) essentially argues for the rich affordances of discussion such as critical thinking and reasoning skills (Jocius et al, 2017) and opportunities for engagement to be recognised. Cazden (2001) recognised that talk in class situations followed a particular pattern which she labelled IRE, referring to *Initiation, Response, Evaluation*. This pattern reinforces the teacher's position as the authority and mediator of knowledge. This pattern and positioning can inhibit personal responses to literature (Miller & Legge, 1999), limit real engagement (Colwell, Woodward & Hutchinson, 2018) and discourage learning (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Nystrand, 1997). In contrast, reading clubs allow shifts away from the dominant IRE pattern because there are more opportunities for learners to discuss and make sense of their understandings together.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This was a participatory case study over six months with one grade 8 class of learners and their English teacher. All ethical procedures were approved by the university and permission to work with a grade 8 class was initially obtained from the principal. He suggested that the focus should be on one grade 8 class, together with their teacher. After discussions and consent from the class teacher, written information about the study was sent home with the learners to get parental consent and learners also signed assent forms to participate. In line with ethical procedures, none of the learners' real names are used; instead, they have been given pseudonyms to maintain a personality.

The school had a mix of English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans learners who had chosen to be in the English home language class, despite many not speaking English at home. As a previously disadvantaged school, there were few facilities, large classes, no functioning library and no set of books for the grade 8 class to read. While whole-class teaching via 'set works' or prescribed class

texts are the norm in ex-Model C schools, the lack of sufficient copies of any novels for this grade required an alternative approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Copies of abridged readers were found in the locked library and since there were five copies of many titles, a differentiated reading club approach was introduced. The class of forty learners divided themselves into groups of five learners and a different set of five books was allocated to each of the eight reading groups to read independently at home. The books ranged in length from 32 to over 100 pages, though only shorter novels were used initially.

To prepare the class for the group, a demonstration in the form of a ‘fishbowl’ reading club allowed the class to see what the discussion could entail. In addition, booktalk was modelled every week with young adult literature and five-minute ‘think-alouds’ to make some of the thinking that regular readers engage in visible. For example, the cover of *The Hunger Games* was used to talk about what the title and cover might suggest and to make some predictions, even if they proved to be wrong. Effective and fluent readers make certain mental moves to ensure ongoing comprehension and research suggests that these need to be made explicit to apprentice readers via regular think-alouds to model predictions, visualising and comprehension monitoring, among others (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Klapwijk & Van der Walt, 2011; Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). The fishbowl activity and the think-alouds also activated learners’ schemata in terms of the language or discourse of booktalk. As mentioned, low socioeconomic status schools serve communities that are less likely to have books (Chetty, 2018) and as some learners indicated that they had never read a book before, it was important for these learners to see how the metalanguage is used in relation to different novels. Reading eight different books over six months also allowed them to engage in this type of booktalk many times and to model the different reading strategies in a reading context (Klapwijk & Van der Walt, 2011). Due to the variety of books available, there were no set questions or formats for the learners to follow and neither were specific roles identified or assigned. Instead, they could choose to focus on whichever element seemed particularly relevant to the group and the book being discussed. Allowing learners choice and agency are also key components in motivating them to participate (Colwell et al., 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2018).

RESULTS

Once a week during their English class, learners could meet in clubs to discuss their response to the book, reflect and finally receive a new title which they would examine and make some predictions about the plot, characters or setting. As indicated, this metalanguage was modelled in whole-class teaching at the beginning of every reading club session; so, talking about character and setting became regular classroom practice. Initially, reading club time focused on group discussions around the books and learners’ talk and later, this was supplemented when individual journal writing was introduced. As neither independent reading nor journal writing would ‘count for marks’, these practices need to be developed as regular literacy events in the English classroom. Reading club members participated in weekly discussions and journal reflections, whether or not they had completed the book. If a book was deemed boring, it could be swapped and conversely, if it was engaging and the group wanted to retain it for another week, that was also allowed.

In understanding learners' responses to the novels, it was important to hear their voices and capture their thinking (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Too often 'children's responses are being ignored in research on a literature that is supposedly meant for them' (Fjällström & Kokkola, 2015: 395) This qualitative study created a space for the learners' voices to be heard and valued as they responded to literature in their reading club booktalk. Thus, the next section presents vignettes of two reading club discussions. The first is by the Keen Kids (Gerri, Lilla, Eran, Leo and Zola—all pseudonyms) about their first book, *Don't Tell Me What to Do* and the second is by the Soaring Eagles discussing *Seedfolk*. Both vignettes are discussed in terms of the kind of talk that learners engage in together and how they elaborate on individual understandings as the talk is mobilised towards a shared creation of knowledge (Mercer, 2010).

Time to talk: The Keen Kids on *Don't Tell Me What to Do*

Learners need many opportunities to engage with books if they are to take up the discourse of the book and make it their own, either in conversation or in writing. In the following section, the Keen Kids recorded their first discussion on the novel, *Don't tell me what to do* by Hardcastle. Reading clubs were free to start with whatever aspect they wished and no one was asked to lead or initiate the discussion. These roles emerged in the interaction. Below is an excerpt from their first discussion, when the group was invited to discuss the main character of their book.

Gerri: Hello (*whispers*) Tom. The main character is Tom.

Leo: (*echoes*) Tom

Zola: (*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 (*Zola & Gerri giggle*) 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?

The group is unsure how to get started and what to say about the main character until Lilla states assertively, to affirm the whispers from the group, that Tom is the main character. She then asks a question of Leo directly. As Leo starts and hesitates, his answer is taken up by Eran, who recounts some of Tom's actions and adds a character assessment about Tom being ambitious. This elaborate answer with some personal insight into Tom provokes giggles from the girls as here, Eran has spoken with an authoritative stance, pronouncing on Tom's character. As Lilla maintains the conversation in the form of questions to which she probably knows the answer or has *an* answer, she is drawing on the school discourse model (Gee, 2015), which Cazden (2001) labelled IRE,

with which she is familiar. She does not query Eran's perceptions of Tom but takes up his mention of *trouble* for further discussion. Thus, she builds on the conversation and by recognising Eran's contribution and extending it, she tacitly validates it. She also attempts to include the quieter members of the group, first by calling on Leo, whose response was hijacked by Eran, and secondly by calling on Zola. It should be noted that no one was asked to lead this discussion but by taking up this position, Lilla demonstrates her participation in the discourse.

In the next section, Zola asks an authentic question—one to which she does not know the answer—and does so quietly and tentatively since authentic questions may suggest uncertainty.

- 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 (*hesitates, unsure*)
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: Eeh (*scared*)
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.

Lilla, the 'teacher authority' in asking and answering the questions, provides an answer to Zola. Lilla does not acknowledge any of the other contributions explicitly but builds on the comments with 'and he told people ...'. Her group supports her in making her point by supplying the names that she hesitates over and she immediately picks these up and continues her point about Tom and his parents. Her statement seems to imply that there is a link between disobeying parents and getting into trouble, as if this was a deserved outcome. When the conversation lapses after her statement, she again resorts to 'question mode' and again focuses on Zola. Again, it would seem as if her initial phrasing implied that she wanted a specific answer so it gets reformulated from focusing on trust to focusing on 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 the main character grew?

Gerri and Zola: (*giggles*)

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 cook(*sic*).

Again, Lilla takes control after much giggling and whispering by answering her own question about Tom's foibles of which falling in love with the daughter of the man who would endanger his life was the most risible. She is not questioned on this statement, despite its rambling nature and instead, Eran asks his own question of Lilla. She is up for his challenge, claiming all the areas in which Tom became stronger in the course of the story.

Generally, this first recording of a reading club interaction follows a question-and-answer format, as identified by Cazden (2000) but the various contributions build on each other cumulatively. The careful listening and echoing reflect a dialogic process of shared utterances. As an electric spark that only occurs when two different terminals were hooked together (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997), so, through these utterances, learners connect to make meaning. Mercer (2000) suggests that through children's talk we have access to their meaning-making processes. Dialogism is a useful theory in examining learners' thinking as Wegerif and Mercer suggest that dialogism offers the 'central insight that understanding always requires more than one voice or perspective' (1997: 51). We see learners in this reading club discussion collaborate in a meaning-making construction of their understanding of the 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. In this reading club space, all the learners could contribute to developing the group's response to the book in a way that was meaningful for them.

While recognising the collaborative nature of the Keen Kids' discussion here, it is also important to recognise the discourses they draw 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 alternates between asking questions, usually based on the content to which she already knows the answer, which she addresses to her group members and answering her own or others' 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 replies very confidently and broadly. No one questions her statement or asks for verification or some evidence of Tom's emotional or physical growth; the 'good' teacher

probably does not face challenges or queries either. If asking the teacher to verify statements is not part of the book discussion discourse, her peers do not see this as a possibility here and support her teacherly stance by not challenging her. Both her role as the teacher and Eran's as the confident pupil provoke much laughter among the group as all seem to be aware of the roles they are playing for this recording. Together, in this dialogic interaction as a group, they could comment on this story which they might not have achieved individually. Therefore, although this group has been given the space to bring their own funds of knowledge and ways of being readers to this discussion, they seem, as a group, to enact a schooled way of doing reading. This enactment indicates their familiarity with the dominant discourse of the book. For that reason, although Leo, for example, just echoes the contribution of the others, this copying or mimicking is a first step in participating and appropriating booktalk. Hence, when given the space and agency to read and respond, this group demonstrates how the third space of a reading club allowed them to engage dialogically in literary talk.

The interactions in this reading club engagement suggest many different emotions. Learners are initially hesitant and nervous about speaking and whisper suggestions to each other. This space, therefore, allowed learners to offer tentative understandings individually, for the group to reach a consensus. In addition to the booktalk, there was also much laughter and enjoyment as learners took ownership of this reading club space. They were free to organise their talking and pose questions to each other as they saw fit and although there was sometimes a reluctance to answer, this happened in the small group setting of their reading club and not in front of the entire class. This literary event reflects talk 'in the moment' which is tentative and exploratory but always focused on making meaning of their reading.

Time to talk: The Soaring Eagles on *Seedfolks*

Like any practice, learners need many opportunities to engage in booktalk to become comfortable with the practice. In the following extract, a different group of learners, the Soaring Eagles (Pat, Nela, Manyano, Adam and Bonny—all pseudonyms) discuss their fourth book, *Seedfolks*, by Paul Fleischman. Again, no one had been appointed to different group roles and though there were no set questions, the regular think-alouds modelled different elements of booktalk which could be taken up by the group if they applied to the respective novels being discussed.

The Soaring Eagles had mixed reactions to *Seedfolks*, which emerged as they were initially led through their discussions by Patricia (Pat). She starts with a conventional question about the main character, which poses an immediate challenge since the book is divided into 16 chapters, each focusing on a different character in the community. Consequently, 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 and later provides her own expanded views but for now, she poses the question to the group.

- 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(*sic*) 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, that they have no idea as there are many different characters is valid in that each chapter gives a different character's views on the developing garden and community, and the book moves chronologically through the seasons. However, to some extent, it shows that Bonny herself has not seen how the chapters are linked. Nela immediately presents an alternative understanding that Kim, the young Asian girl whose actions spark the story and the community renewal, is the main character. This is then supported by the other group members as Pat asks them in turn. She doesn't volunteer her thoughts until Nela asks her directly. Bonny seems to quietly acquiesce to the majority view and adds to the discussion in response to Pat's next question, "Who is this, Kim?". Pat is building on what has already been suggested about Kim's contribution to the story by probing for details about her. Bonny's response indicates a general understanding with some vagueness about Kim's national origin. Pat then pulls together some pertinent details about Kim.

- Pat: So, she's fatherless.
Nela: Hmm ...
Pat: She's a teenage girl.
Nela: Hmm ...
Pat: ... and she's in(*sic*) a mission.
Bonny: Huh?
Pat: I think she in(*sic*) 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 ...

As Pat makes her points, affirmative fillers are heard from Nela and Bonny which encourage Pat to elaborate that Kim is on a mission to find out who she is. Nela seeks affirmation from Manyano and then Pat develops her point about teenagers generally needing to develop a sense of personal identity. It would seem as if Pat could elaborate further when Bonny adds her support for Pat's interpretations. In some ways, Pat is speaking for all teenagers here but she stays focused on the story without deviating to personal stories. Her points seem to resonate with the group and instead of elaborating on her own opinion, she hesitates and then introduces new questions for the group to consider, starting with the setting, an element modelled in a whole-class think-aloud.

- 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(*sic*) flats, apartments and it includes farming.
Pat: Farming, Ok. So, the other characters, how do you feel about the book?

Manyano mentions the city, Cleveland but this needs a more familiar location so Nela and Manyano both add the rider, America. Pat accepts this as sufficient on one level and then narrows the focus by asking about rural or urban. Again, this points to a significant challenge in this book, which Pat seems alert to but does not attempt to reconcile, the rural–urban binary. Bonny's suggestion of urban is quite tentative and she backs up her point with details of apartments and flats but then adds the notion of farming, which seems out of place in an urban setting. Pat echoes her last point about farming and then proceeds to her next question. The group does not attempt to reconcile the notion of 'farming' with an urban setting of flats and apartments, though it does seem to perplex their thinking and maybe even Pat has not considered the possibility of communal gardening in urban spaces. As Hirsch (2003) points out, comprehension requires knowledge of the *world* as well as knowledge of the *word* and so, although the vocabulary of the novel is familiar, the concept of flats, inhabited by transient migrants, overlooking desolate lots, might be less familiar. Instead, Pat tries to provoke a general response to the book in a series of questions and answers.

- 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: Hmm ...
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: Ja
and Manyano
Nela: It does. Definitely, yes.

That the book was different from their usual reading fare was evident in both Bonny and Manyano's comments. Indeed, Manyano later revealed that he had not read any books before the introduction of reading clubs. In his primary school experience, learners were given one-page extracts from books or copies of newspaper articles or poems to read but never a complete book. Here, Pat again hesitates to offer her opinion but decides to move on with questions and probe their understanding of the relevance and significance of the title. She is supported by Nela who prompts them to think about word association from the title. Manyano's comment about Ubuntu is lost in the conversation as Bonny's considered response focuses on the word 'seed' and the link to activities like farming and digging at a literal level, which is the first understanding used in the book. The difference between farming and gardening is never explored and the latter term is never actually used by the group; maybe the concept of gardening as a hobby or a small-scale enterprise was unfamiliar to them. Although Pat leads the question-and-answer session, she does not assess the answers in any way but seems to use them cumulatively to introduce the next question. She and Nela reserve their comments on their understandings of the title and instead, Pat challenges the group to see connections between the title and the story.

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 in a gentle, probing and insightful way 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 rather, skillfully guided her group's understanding. Unlike Lilla who seemed to want the 'right answer', Pat seems to want to engage more with the answers that are volunteered by her group. She uses her group's answers to pose further questions that challenge deeper thinking. While the title is not discussed by the Keen Kids in the earlier discussion, it is a point of discussion for Pat's group as she asks them not only to consider the title and its associations but also to think about how it relates to the book. Having asked the question and received affirmative responses, Pat leaves it at that and doesn't ask anyone to explain further. Instead, she asks further questions that allow group members to make their own connections with the story.

- 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(*sic*) 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.
- Man: Ja. That was one.
- Alton: Ja

Asking about precious and saddest moments are unusual requests and indicate both the poignancy of the story and Pat's sensitivity to it. Her group is responsive to Bonny sharing a touching instance of romantic love with tomatoes as a way to a girl's heart, which seems to amuse and resonate with the group. Bonny's mentioning of Kim's father's death precedes the story but also catalyses Kim into action to connect with her father and his roots. This earlier sadness in Kim's life lingers into her new life in the United States and planting seeds in memory of him both signifies Kim's links backwards to her national heritage and forward to her new American life. Nela's choice of dying lettuces might seem trivial in comparison with a dead father but in the context of the story, the lettuces symbolise far more and though neither Nela nor the others expand on this point, their mentioning of it points to their understanding of its deeper significance in the characters' lives. Manyano and Adam mainly seem content to go along with the girls' suggestions for precious and sad moments. With more probing, they might have been encouraged to voice their suggestions on these two issues. Again, Pat's questions reflect her insight into the novel as there were no clear-

cut answers to either question. In truth, points could have been made for virtually any other character's story as precious or sad but learners here are given the choice to direct their own understanding and responses. Although Pat leads this discussion and does not always get the clarification needed, she does encourage her group to think about the metaphorical levels of this book. As a grade 8 learner herself, she has taken up the metalanguage of booktalk such as the setting and the title that had been modelled and attempted to help her group engage with these. Although there were no set questions, as each book was so different, it seems like Pat had compiled a checklist of aspects that should be discussed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Through reading club talk, Cazden's (2001) pattern of teacher-fronted questioning was disrupted in both reading clubs, as the onus for talking shifted onto the learners and their responses. Authentic conversations where teachers and learners interact to clarify understandings are 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 IRE patterns of instruction with discussion-based activities' (ibid: 693). These could include learners making predictions or linking to other texts (Colwell et al., 2018); clarifying understanding, posing questions or mustering evidence to support a claim or understanding – as happened with these interactions with *The Soaring Eagles*. Social and cognitive interactions contributed to joint knowledge construction (Colwell et al., 2018). The affordances of discussions as learning opportunities are often overlooked in South African language classrooms (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016) and thus opportunities for developing reading comprehension and critical thinking (Jocius et al., 2017) are reduced. In contrast, reading club spaces allowed learners to take up the agency to discuss each novel as they saw fit. In doing so, they valued each other's contributions and dialogically built toward a group understanding (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2020). In the discussions, they seem to draw on the voices of prior learning and use these in new and unique ways, which indicate the appropriation and internalisation 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). A transactional understanding of reading as the interaction of the reader with the text recognises what the reader brings to the text and that ongoing 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' (McMahon & Raphael, 1997: 14). Thus, through reading clubs, new classroom practices were introduced which provided spaces for learners to take up agency and engage with literature.

What emerged powerfully in the recordings was the diversity of learner voices engaging dialogically in booktalk. This dialogic engagement required a communal sharing of ideas which were extended, refined and challenged through the exchange with peers. In this sharing, various reading strategies were evident, specifically monitoring of understanding, which Klapwijk and Van der Walt (2011) suggest is important for teachers to see in practice. Creating a third space within a school context provided a legitimate school time for learners to talk about their responses

to the books. Through the talk in the reading clubs, we see learners thinking about the books and providing evidence from the texts to support their interpretations and thereby, we can see how 'discussion is a key tool for learning both language and content' (Snow, 2014:16).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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