Supporting reading-literacy: a grade 6 pilot study

Raymond Cornelissen and Wendy McMillan

Abstract

This paper discusses a pilot reading-literacy development initiative in a class of Grade 6 township learners. The purpose of the study was to pilot a model of literacy development that could be implemented across a wider platform of schools. The pilot study, using classroom observation and focus group interviews, was designed within a psycholinguistic perspective. Criteria for effective reading-literacy development – access to text and the desire to engage, knowing what to do with text, and opportunities to understand and reflect on text – were used to design the study, and as a lens for analysis. The paper focuses on case studies as illustrative examples of the ways in which the initiative supported access to texts, reading-literacy confidence, and the development of interpretive and reflective reading skills. The study suggests that a conducive literacy environment, including access to texts, knowing what to do with texts, and opportunities to understand and reflect on text – as well as the support of teachers who know how to facilitate literacy – has the potential to achieve literacy gains for even seriously compromised learners.

Introduction

Basic literacy competencies are taught in the first few years of schooling, and thereafter learners are expected to be able to apply these competences to new reading challenges (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). However, many children fail to develop basic reading competence in the early years (Bhattacharya, 2010; Enriquez et al., 2010; Graves & Liang, 2008). In 2003, a study conducted by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) found literacy levels in the region to be poor, with only 36,8% of Grade 6 learners able to score at age-appropriate levels (WCED, 2003). Only 26,6% of children from historically "coloured" schools in the region performed at age-appropriate levels (WCED, 2003). The Report (2003:7) highlighted the "striking relationship" between poverty indices and literacy competence. International studies suggest that children from homes where literacy practices rewarded at school are not modelled struggle to master basic literacy competencies in the early years at school (Enrichez et al., 2010).

This paper discusses a pilot study designed to support the reading-literacy of a single class of Grade 6 learners in a township school near Cape Town. The primary aim of the study was to develop and pilot a reading-literacy initiative appropriate for the age, needs and context of this particular cohort of learners and their teachers. The paper

commences with a discussion of current understandings of reading-literacy. The setting and nature of the initiative are then described. A discussion of the methodology follows. Thereafter, the paper focuses on case studies of children from the cohort as illustrative examples of ways in which the initiative supported reading-literacy development.

Literature review

A psycholinguistic understanding of literacy framed the study (Smith, 2004). Barton (2007: 24) provided our working definition of "literacy" – "The key to new views of literacy is situated reading and writing in its social context". The focus of the study is "reading", understood as the "conversion of written forms into linguistic message" (Perfetti et al., 2001: 127). Both definitions imply a social context to literacy. The psycholinguistic approach challenges the assumptions that reading is about decoding letters into words (Smith, 2004). Instead it takes meaning as the starting point of literacy (Smith, 2004). Reading is therefore the process of constructing meaning from written texts (Perfetti et al., 2001).

The desire to make sense drives comprehension. Readers read to "find out". Prediction is central to effective reading and allows the reader to eliminate unlikely alternatives (Smith, 2004). Reading implies asking predictive questions of text; comprehension is having these questions answered (Smith, 2004). Comprehension depends on background knowledge, text structure, reader habits, fluency, and automatic word recognition (Rupley et al., 2009; Lewis & Ferretti, 2009). The teaching of reading should enable learners to decode and comprehend (Rupley et al., 2009), and involves fostering learning from text, nurturing response to literature, teaching comprehension strategies, and promoting higher-order thinking (Enriquez et al., 2010).

Programmes that promote reading-literacy facilitate children's access to text and their desire to engage, help children to know what to do with text, provide opportunities for children to understand and reflect on text, and develop teacher competence.

Access to text and desire to engage

Reading development depends on access to text (Meyer, 2010). Access implies a text-rich classroom environment (for example, fiction and non-fiction books, magazines, newspapers, posters, noticeboards) (Krashen, 2004). Texts should be readily available so that learners are not forced to find their own reading material outside of school (Pilgreen, 2000). The texts need to be sufficiently interesting for learners to want to read them (Pilgreen, 2000). Text selection is important because novice readers need texts that they can master and where they can be successful as readers (Rupley et al., 2009). Novice readers also need assistance with strategies for selecting appropriate books, so that these books are neither too easy nor too difficult, and are matched to the particular child"s interests (Kragler, 2000).

Kimbell-Lopez (2003) argues that the environment should be both physically and psychologically conducive to reading. Pilgreen (2000) suggests the creation of a comfortable, homely physical space. Access to text also implies time dedicated for that purpose. Regular opportunities to read need to be embedded into the school programme (Kimbell-Lopez, 2003), even for middle school learners (Ivey, 2002), so that reading

becomes habitual (Pilgreen, 2000). For a psychologically conducive environment, Kimbell-Lopez (2003: 13) emphasizes a "low-risk atmosphere" where readers try on the new identity as reader (Enriquez et al., 2010). Identity, and consequent reading behavior, confidence and competence, influences how readers perceive themselves, how others perceive the reader, and how a reader is motivated to engage in reading (Enriquez et al., 2010). Accountability is embedded through opportunities for sharing in discussion, writing and other formats (Pilgreen, 2000). These activities are self-selected (Kimbell-Lopez, 2003) because the more freedom that readers have to develop their own ideas related to what they have read, the greater will be the ownership and engagement related to the reading activity (Pilgreen, 2000).

Knowing what to do with text

Reading development depends on knowing what to do with text. Smith (1987:3) argues that readers learn from others, by "joining the literacy club" of readers and being helped to engage in their activities. The strategies of successful readers can be shared with and taught to novice readers. These include understanding the purposes of reading, activating prior knowledge, decoding sounds and symbols, identifying and paying attention to main ideas, making inferences, summarizing, monitoring comprehension, predicting, creating visual representations, asking and answering questions, clarifying, determining what is important, making meaning, dealing with graphic information, text analysis, and critical evaluation (Gritter, 2011; Enriquez et al., 2010). Explicit teaching, through modelling reading strategies, embeds these strategies in authentic reading situations, and allows the teacher and learners to reflect upon a particular strategy and how it might be used (Rupley et al., 2009).

Book-sharing, including discussion with peers and teachers, helps novices to experience what attracts devoted readers to reading. These conversations assist novice readers to respond to text (Blum et al., 2010). Learners explore topics more thoroughly, more positively and with greater motivation when they work with a group of friends (Hartup, 1996) as discussion with friends serves as a safe way to scaffold interpretations of text (Gritter, 2011). Peer tutored paired reading is supported in this environment (Topping & Lindsay, 1992). Peer reading assists learners who are struggling with the mechanical processes of reading, but also allows for peer exploration of the meaning of texts. Mentored reading allows the mentee to control the surface-level processing of text so that s/he can focus on the deeper levels of meaning embedded in the text (Rasinski, 2004).

Further, teachers can read to learners. Children who are read to regularly over time make significant reading comprehension gains (Krashen, 2004). Reading aloud and sharing authentic questions gives teachers insight into learners' understanding of words, meaning-making strategies, knowledge of author's purpose and use of texts in socio-cultural context, and critical competence (Meyer, 2010).

Opportunities to understand and reflect on text

Effective reading depends on being able to understand and reflect upon text (Gritter, 2011; Blum et al., 2010; Pilgreen, 2000). Novice readers need opportunities to integrate the ideas in the text and elaborate on them, and to engage in application activities that reflect what was been read (Gritter, 2011). Such activities include drama, role play,

creation of own texts, drawing, poster creation, graphic organizers, story maps and outlines (Pilgreen, 2000). Comprehension is deepened if learners weave their own life experiences with classroom texts (Gritter, 2011). Writing provides a particularly rich follow up experience, as reading and writing are reciprocal activities (Anderson & Briggs, 2011). Explicit teaching to help learners understand this reciprocal nature accelerates literacy learning (Anderson & Briggs, 2011).

Developing teacher competence
Since effective reading programmes depend on teachers who know how to facilitate reading, teacher development is essential. Teachers need to understand the socially mediated nature of literacy (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010).

Methodology
Study design
A pilot study design was selected to examine whether planned activities and actions were able to develop and support reading-literacy in young learners. Conn (2010) argues that methodologically sound pilot studies have a contribution to make to knowledge in a domain, guiding thinking of other investigators both within the specific research area and the discipline as whole. The methodological approach to the pilot study was qualitative. Qualitative research is concerned with discovering the meanings seen by those who are being researched and with understanding their view of the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). A qualitative approach allowed for the development of insights into the reading-literacy experiences and perceptions of young readers, and made possible conclusions about aspects of reading practices (such as desire to engage with reading, reading confidence, reacting to texts, learning with peers, learning to read through writing) that are difficult to measure quantitatively (Merriam, 2001). A case-study approach was selected. A case study is a specific instance designed to illustrate a general principle or provide a description and understanding of a situation or behavior (Nisbet & Watt, 1984).

Setting and participants
The study was conducted in a primary school in an impoverished community near Cape Town. A single class of 39 Grade 6 learners was selected. The community from which the learners were drawn was characterized by high density sub-economic housing, high levels of unemployment, poverty, gangsterism and violence (Statistics South Africa, 2001). The school was selected because it was representative of the majority of schools in this circuit. The medium of instruction was Afrikaans. The learners were all from communities historically classified as "coloured". Most spoke an Afrikaans working class dialect. (All quotations are translated.) This particular class was selected because their teacher had expressed interest in developing the literacy of his learners. All 39 learners in the class were involved in all literacy activities. To collect in-depth data about reading-literacy gains, ten children from the class were identified as a research cohort. Five were identified by the teacher at an initial meeting as "top" readers and five as "struggling" readers.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the university where the primary researcher was registered as a Masters" student. Written permission to conduct the research was obtained from WCED, the principal of the school, the classroom teacher, and the children's parents. Consent to participate was negotiated verbally with the child participants. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the children and their teacher.

Data sources

Data was collected over six months from a pilot reading-literacy development programme (Figure 1). Each literacy activity conducted by the primary researcher was recorded on video and transcribed by that researcher. The primary researcher reflected in a journal after each session, and on frequent occasions in-between. The teacher was interviewed before the study to elicit his understanding of literacy and to collect baseline data about the classroom literacy environment. The teacher was interviewed at the end of the study to elicit his perceptions of the activities and the reading-literacy gains of his learners. Both interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Focus group interviews were conducted by the primary researcher with the ten cohort learners, on the first day that the researcher visited the class, half way through the study, and at the final session. These interviews were recorded on video. The first interview focused on attitudes towards reading and opportunities to read, both at school and home. The second interview discussed book selection and aspects related to comprehension in an attempt to assess interim learning from the activities. The final interview elicited learners responses to the activities, their perceptions of their own learning, and assessed their decoding, application of prior knowledge, interpretation, critique, and reflection (Blum et al., 2010). Focus group interviews generate a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (Morgan, 1998), and were considered by the researchers to be less stressful for child participants since more than one child was interviewed simultaneously. Posters and stories written by the learners during the initiative were also collected as evidence of literacy development.

Fieldwork
Teacher development

The reading-literacy initiative was intended to empower the learners" class and home language teacher, and made use of discussion, modelling, and reflection. After an initial discussion with the teacher, the primary researcher shared the principles of a psycholinguistic approach to literacy, and discussed how this approach demands learner engagement with text. Using an information sheet, appropriate strategies were shared and the rationale for their appropriateness elaborated. The strategies were then modelled in the teacher's classroom with his class of learners by the primary researcher. Thereafter the teacher and primary researcher discussed ways in which the strategies might be adapted or extended. The primary researcher visited the classroom once a week, at each visit engaging in literacy activities with the children and pre- and post-activity discussion with the teacher.

Reading-literacy activities and actions

In 2001, WCED (2000) instituted a "reading half hour" to ensure for "additional time to be devoted to reading". Reading development during this time was to be "planned", and might include "paired reading, silent reading, adults coming is as reading volunteers, stories being listened to, learners writing their own stories or texts and reading these" (WCED, 2000). "(R)eading for enjoyment" was emphasized (WCED, 2000). The synchronicity between requirements for the reading half hour and "best practice" emerging from the literature led the researchers to embed the study's reading-literacy development activities within the reading half hour. However, the purpose of the study was not to pilot a silent reading programme (Pilgreen, 2000). Rather, it was to pilot strategies that would support reading-literacy, and some of these activities (including, for example, writing stories) were conducted at other times during the formal curriculum.

Initially teacher development focused on assisting the teacher to create a physical environment that was conducive to reading-literacy. The emphasis was on providing a physical "home" for reading – a comfortable space where texts were invitingly displayed. Prior to the study, the classroom did not have a reading area. A handful of appropriate story books were shared with the class next door. Children were allowed to fetch one of these books once they had finished their class-work. This arrangement precluded slower workers (and implicitly struggling readers) from opportunities to engage with text. Improvement of the physical environment was achieved through teacher development. The teacher removed a large table with his computer from the classroom to make space available for a designated reading area. The classroom was painted, and elderly, dark curtains removed. A variety of fiction and non-fiction books was introduced through the "100 Books" project, an initiative intended to provide "schools with sufficient reading materials to empower teachers to improve literacy levels … across Grades 1 – 6" (WCED, 2006:3). Magazines and newspapers were added to extend the available texts. An outing to the local library, and assistance in joining the library, further extended text access.

Table 1 summarises the reading-literacy activities provided to the children, as well as the actions by the primary researcher and the teacher that led to a reading-literacy conducive environment.

Table 1: Literacy activities and actions

Date	Literacy activities and actions
26/3	Researcher introduces "100 Books" into classroom Children Introduced to purposes for reading, introduced to strategies for selecting appropriate books, asked to choose books
16/4	Magazines and newspapers brought into classroom to extend kinds of texts Asked to talk about stories they have read Introduced to activating prior knowledge, identifying and paying attention to main ideas, determining what is important Asked to find out why people in their community need to read
23/4	Since 16/4, book area created and books displayed attractively by teacher Asked to talk about stories that they have read, and modeling of making meaning, summarizing, monitoring comprehension
7/5	Since 23/4, teacher displayed posters and pictures to decorate walls and poster-boards Discussion of prediction (from title and during story-telling), asking and answering questions, text analysis (including theme and message) Revision of making meaning, summarizing, monitoring comprehension
14/5	Asked to talk about stories they have read, revising prior strategies Struggling readers asked to select reading mentors
21/5	Teacher viewed video "Honey" with class Discussion of "Honey", with emphasis on critical evaluation and relevance to own life Reading to class of prepared story (*My Pa* by Niki Daly), and modeling of taught strategies in context
4/6	Since 28/5, teacher took class to local library and helped individuals to join Encouragement of extended discussion of stories, emphasizing asking questions of text
11/6	Since 4/6, teacher introduced class to concept of plot; classroom painted; teacher's computer table moved out of classroom

Date	Literacy activities and actions
	Suggested to children that they write their own stories Discussion of process of story writing, and elements required of a story
18/6	Since 4/6, teacher displayed posters that children made about reading Encouragement of extended discussion of stories including critical evaluation, emphasis on competence and confidence Children asked to summarise story orally in 5 sentences
16/7	Since 18/6, teacher encouraged learners to write an original story, with illustrations, of at least 8 pages Asked to read and talk about their own written stories – opportunity taken to teach editing skills
23/7	Asked to talk about stories they had read and written; emphasis on confidence, competence, depth of insight, and conscious utilization of all taught strategies

Data analysis

Three broad categories from the literature (access to text and desire to engage; knowing what to do with text; understanding and reflection on text) served as lenses for data analysis. The data related to each of the ten children in the cohort (whether observed by the primary researcher, elicited from interviews, or evidenced in stories and posters) were

sieved for evidence of reading-literacy actions, activities, engagement or gains related to each of the three identified categories. A composite picture of each child's reading-literacy journey during the study was thus developed. This mode of analysis helped identify "critical incidents" for individual learners.

Initial analysis was conducted by the primary researcher. Thereafter, the second researcher, who had not performed any of the observations or taught any of the literacy activities, verified the analysis by checking for authenticity of interpretation between the various sources of data, the identified characteristics, and the initial analysis. Disagreement of interpretation resulted in lengthy discussion, some reclassification, and some abandonment of analytical claims.

Discussion

In the discussion that follows, individual case studies from the pilot illustrate the extent to which different reading-literacy initiatives facilitated reading-literacy development for specific learners.

Access to text and the desire to engage

Access to text is the baseline requirement for reading-literacy development (Pilgreen 2000). There was, however, evidence that access to the 'right' book directly facilitated literacy development for individuals within the cohort (Wurtz & Wedick, 2005).

Sally: Access to the 'right' book

Encouragement to access the 'right' book contributed to Sally's reading-literacy development. While identified by the teacher as one of the competent readers, Sally was initially not able to talk about what she had read. However, four weeks into the study, after activities related to understanding the purposes of reading, activating background knowledge, identifying and paying attention to main ideas, summarizing, questioning, clarifying and predicting, and monitoring comprehension, Sally was able to discuss *Pappa Lucky's Shadow* by Niki Daly. Her discussion indicated she understood both theme, "The book is about dancing and a man who dances and makes music" and message, "If you want to, you can make money. If you can dance, you can make money." While these quotations indicate comprehension, her competence must be contextualized. *Pappa Lucky's Shadow* is a picture book, with one or two paragraphs of text per double page spread. Comprehension is scaffolded with illustrations. The reading challenge is more appropriate to Grade One than to Grade Six. It was therefore decided to challenge her (Krashen, 2004) with more complex text, and those not supported with illustrations. Sally rose to the challenge, "I am not really used to reading books without pictures, but I can try". Two weeks later, she shared proudly that she had read her first book without pictures.

That she continued to read texts without illustrations was clear when Sally started to write her own stories. When Sally shared her second story, she had blending elements from stories that she had read – and by their content, stories without illustration – with her experiences. A quotation from the story, along with her discussion of her writing process, illustrates this synthesis. The story is a romance marred by betrayal, "September month came. You could hear the birds call in the early morning. Sophie read

an old novel. She felt how her blood was freezing in her veins ...". Sally's use of image indicated an awareness of the significance of image in the construction of atmosphere and meaning – as, for example, "teardrops against the window" and "love blooms again". Clearly the storyline, and some of the text and images, were 'borrowed'. Yet, Sally's description of her writing process is evidence of the authenticity of her composition process and her developing identity as a reader and writer:

I first wrote it on another piece of paper to see if I had written it correctly – before I wrote it in the book. I checked that there weren't any gaps in the story, but there weren't – I had it all sorted out in my head. I checked that the spelling was right. I look at – how can I put this first part nicely – all before I wrote it in the book.

Also authentic was the way in which she drew on her own life experiences to frame the story:

I just decided one day when my teacher said that we must write a story – I just thought of a beautiful princess. Our teacher said that we must make a spider diagram of the story that we wanted to write, so I made the diagram – of the girl. She had lots of friends just like I did before we moved .... And then she did get lots of new friends – and that gave me the courage to play with others, here.

Sally's literacy journey indicated development from an initial learner who could read competently out loud, without any sense of code breaking, meaning making, text using and text analyzing (Enriquez et al., 2010), to a reader of age-appropriate picture-less texts and a writer and composer of texts that showed sophisticated insights into language usage, imagery, storyline, theme and message. The key factors in this success were access to texts, the desire to engage, and direct and positive encouragement.

Trevor: Gaining confidence
Beyond a print-rich environment, access to texts implies an environment that is emotionally conducive to reading and experienced by novice readers as low risk (Kimbell-Lopez, 2003). Literacy strategies are insufficient without the psychological support that helps children to see themselves as readers.

Identified as a struggling reader, Trevor was anxious about reading because he believed he "can't read right". He looked away when asked about books, and continuously rubbed the top of his head. The explanation of this action was captured on video:

Researcher: Why do you rub the top of your head when I talk to you?
Trevor: (long pause) I am afraid that Sir is going to hit me.
Researcher: Why do you think that I am going to hit you?
Trevor: I can't read right.
Researcher: Did someone hit you for that?
Trevor: ...A long time ago ... My teacher, Sir.

Since he belonged to the library, Trevor clearly had a curiosity about books, even though he struggled to read. However, at the time of the study, Trevor no longer took

books from the library, "I haven't taken the library book back yet. I don't have the money to pay for the fine. The book was late – I still have it". Unable by poverty to return the book because of the fine and thus denied access to further books, and like many of the children in the study having no appropriate books at home, Trevor was denied access to appropriate reading material until texts were brought into the classroom. The reading-literacy initiative provided access to books, timetabled time to access the books, skills and support for engaging with books, and encouragement to make use of these opportunities. Half way through the study Trevor believed that he had become more competent, "I am getting better with my reading". This confidence spurred him to take on more challenging reading activities. Two weeks later he indicated that he had read a book of thirty pages. A further fortnight later, Trevor had read another book and said that he thought that "reading was very nice".

After the mid-year vacation, Trevor's confidence and growing competence was further evident. He discussed three books that he had read, with detail about character. He spoke loudly and fluently, and for the first time looked the researcher in the eye as he discussed his books. During the following term, Trevor read nine books and chose to record their titles in a book that he had made. He was able to discuss these books, using prior knowledge, making inferences, summarizing, and asking and answering clarifying and predicting questions of the texts. He bubbled over, declaring, "I can read!" By the end of the study, Trevor was taking books home regularly and had re-joined the library. He had been able to re-join because his library had an annual amnesty where users were encouraged to return overdue library books without incurring any fine. In the final session, he looked the video camera confidently in the 'eye' as he discussed one of the stories he had read. He no longer rubbed his head. For Trevor, multiple development opportunities had contributed to his identity as a reader.

Knowing what to do with text

Access to text implies dedicated opportunities to engage with the text, and assistance in the development of appropriate strategies for this engagement. In the study, children were encouraged to share the stories they had read. Strategies for supporting comprehension were explicitly modelled and discussed (Enriquez et al, 2010).

Vinny: Reacting and interpreting texts

Five weeks into the study, it was clear that most of the children still lacked the confidence to talk about the stories they had read. A potentially self-defeating cycle has been set up. Children need to have a story in order to talk about it. However, a reader lacking confidence may not read and will therefore not have a story to talk about. And it is in retelling and talking about stories that novice readers learn the skills they need in order to be able to read in the first place.

It was therefore decided to provide children with stories that they did not have to read themselves and which they could discuss (Gritter, 2011). To this end, the primary researcher read stories to the class and then led discussions about them. Since that researcher only visited once a week, the teacher was asked to read stories as regularly as possible – daily preferably – and to discuss them. Finally, it was decided to exploit a medium with which children are familiar. The teacher was provided with a copy of the

video of *Honey*, and asked to view and discuss it with the class. These opportunities served as a literacy breakthrough for Vinny.

Vinny was two years older than the other children in the class. At the commencement of the study, his reading competence was compromised. He read aloud very slowly and struggled with word recognition. He lacked confidence, looking away when asked about books. However, after viewing *Honey*, Vinny was the first to respond by engaging in description. Two weeks later, Vinny was able to react and interpret the values and message in the video, *Honey* – "You mustn't take other people's things. It is wrong and you can go to jail if you do that". More significantly with regard to his development as a reader, Vinny said that he had learnt from the video that "you can do anything that you really want to do". While Vinny continued to struggle to read unsupported, the literacy initiative helped him develop some of the comprehension skills that literate people need and practice (Enriquez et al., 2010).

Hein: Learning with peers

Access to texts was facilitated for Hein, one of the struggling readers, in yet another way. His literacy access involved mentorship, encouragement, and opportunities to experience what devoted readers already know (Krashen, 2004). At the commencement of the study, Hein had little sense of the value of reading, suggesting that perhaps reading made you "clever" and allowed you to "become something". Even after the class had researched the importance of literacy in their community, Hein was unsure of its significance, "I did ask at the shop why he needed to read, but I can't remember what he said". The physical availability of a variety of texts, and the time to engage with them, did not serve as access for Hein. His lack of understanding of the value of reading shaped his attitude towards reading – since he did not understand it to be important, he was not willing to invest in an activity that he obviously experienced as challenging. The researchers therefore had to mediate his access.

When it became evident that some of the struggling readers were not actually able to access the texts that had been provided because they struggled with the mechanical process of reading, a peer mentoring programme was instituted. Struggling readers were asked to choose a reading mentor from amongst the most competent readers. The mentor read texts chosen by the struggling reader. Initially the mentor read out loud while the mentee followed the text with a finger. The tempo of reading was thus adjusted to the struggling reader's potential to follow. Later both mentor and mentee read texts aloud together; and finally the mentee read alone assisted by the mentor when the former struggled. Discussion, using the various strategies taught, was encouraged between mentor and mentee. Hein selected Shelley, one of the more capable readers in his class, as a mentor.

At the mentoring feedback session a week later, Shelley complained that Hein "fooled around" when they were supposed to be reading together, "He doesn't want to read. He will rather play when he has nothing to do, but he doesn't want me to help him". Hein's behaviour was understood by the researchers to indicate that he felt threatened by the challenge of reading. Rather than reprimanding him, the importance of being able to read was reiterated and the value of taking advantage of reading opportunities provided

by the mentoring was highlighted. This strategy paid off. A week later Hein was able to summarise the plot from a story that he had read with his mentor.

While Hein continued to struggle to read aloud, and could independently only read simple texts well below his age-appropriate reading level, he made progress during the study. By the end of period he could summarise the plot and identify the main ideas in a story. However, he continued to struggle to draw inferences or evaluate – in the words of his mentor, "he can't say the message of the story yet". Physical access to books was not enough for Hein. He needed a mentor's support to access the texts, and the encouragement of an adult to take up what was clearly a significant challenge.

Understanding and reflection on text

Follow up activities allow readers to reflect on what they have read, and to draw conclusions and link text to their own experience (Gritter, 2011). Writing provides a particularly rich reflective experience because of the reciprocal nature of reading and writing (Anderson & Briggs, 2011).

Jenny: Writing to read

For Jenny, writing provided opportunities for reflection and facilitated her development as a reader and writer. Although able to summarise, question, clarify and predict, Jenny remained anxious when asked to discuss books, "When Sir asks us such difficult questions, then I am afraid". Four weeks into the study, her confidence with regard to reading-literacy was not fully established. She indicated that she planned to write her own story once she had read one more book. Two weeks later, when asked about her story, she said that she had written a number of stories but that she had left them at home. Either she was not yet confident enough to write, or she lacked yet the confidence to share her written work. However, for Jenny, writing became the catalyst to literacy. As she began to write and to share what she wrote, Jenny realized that she had a talent in this regard. Her increased confidence led to evermore writing. During the programme she wrote nine illustrated stories which she "sold ... to other children at home". Jenny came to see writing not only as something that gave her pleasure and affirmed her confidence, but as a skill that other people valued – indeed, a marketable competence. For Jenny, writing ignited both literacy confidence and competence. It gave her courage to start reading books without pictures, "At the beginning, I didn't like reading so much ... I am proud that I don't read so many books with pictures anymore".

While the data presented were evidence from only five of the whole class of learners, all five made reading-literacy gains. While the gains may not yet have brought them all up to age-appropriate competence, what they achieved in terms of competence and confidence should facilitate further reading-literacy learning.

Conclusion

The study aimed to develop and pilot a reading-literacy initiative appropriate for the age, needs and context of a particular cohort of learners and their teacher. Data, presented through the preceding case studies, illustrates the extent to which the piloted strategies facilitated reading- literacy gains. Given that the school, classroom and learners in the study were selected expressly because they were characteristic of those

surveyed in the WCED literacy study (2003), it is arguable that the insights from these cases have potential transferability to other similar school contexts. While the labour intensive involvement characteristic of the pilot is not-sustainable, it is possible to develop an alternative model for larger scale teacher development. Using the same methodology (discussion, and sharing of ideas, resources and accessible readings), workshops might be devised that use video footage of successful activities to model suitable strategies. Further, successful literacy teachers might be invited to share their philosophy and consequent practice at such workshops.

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