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Year 8 Students' Responses to Literature:

The Development of Reading Comprehension and Literary Awareness

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

Massey University

Palmerston North, New Zealand

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2015

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Abstract

The objective of this project was to investigate the responses to literature that two Year 8 class groups made over the course of an academic year, to understand more fully how students of this age develop both comprehension and literary understandings of texts. Specifically, the questions this research addresses are:

1. What do Year 8 students' responses to text reveal about the development of their reading comprehension?
2. What do Year 8 students' responses to text reveal about the development of their literary understandings?

Using a qualitative case study design, responses to literature were collected by the teacher-researcher, over a normal year's teaching. This meant the recording of 40 literature discussion groups over the school year, as well as collecting written responses related to those discussion groups. In addition, data from PAT Reading Comprehension assessments in March and September were used to further corroborate development of reading comprehension in the students. The classroom environment is described, illustrating the ways in which the characteristics of early adolescent learners are met, both in terms of their increasing drive for autonomy and ability to think in more abstract ways, and in meeting the curriculum requirements for students who will graduate into secondary education at the end of the school year.

The rich data gathered were organised into three illustrative case studies, demonstrating examples of the progress in both literary understanding and reading comprehension that students made. Students worked together in literature discussions to construct new understandings of the texts they were reading. They were also agentic, within the learning environment, using literature discussions to address their unique 'noticings' and questions about texts, and challenging the views of their peers. Written responses revealed that students actively listened and then developed ideas further, after their discussions, elaborating and clarifying responses into 'defensible interpretations' of texts. Their responses were indicative of a developing 'literary literacy', as described by Lehman (2007), whereby the literacy goals of reading comprehension and the literary goals underpinning developing literary understandings are compatible and often develop in conjunction with each other.

The findings show that Year 8 children are capable of developing sophisticated understandings about texts. The findings suggest that a learning environment designed to foster a literary cycle of reading and interaction with literature, promoting literary growth, and sharing responses to literature with other students (Lehman, 2007) can provide Year 8 students with the opportunity to be engaged, motivated readers; meet their early adolescent drive for autonomy; and address increasingly

sophisticated curriculum requirements in preparation for the disciplinary reading required for secondary education. These results have implications for classroom practice for Year 8 students.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take the opportunity to thank Dr Brian Finch, mentor and coach, and Dr Alison Arrow, for being patient and supportive supervisors for this project. Without your guidance, I would not have been able to complete this work, and make some sort of sense of what at times felt like an overwhelming sea of data. I am grateful for your forbearance and wise words.

To the Principal and the staff of my school, as well as to my Board of Trustees, I thank you for supporting me in undertaking this research with our students, and for your flexibility with my hours.

To my students who inspired me to learn more, and who taught me new things every day, thank you for letting me record you, and for being open to trying out and suggesting new ways of learning. To the parents of my students, thank you for allowing your children to be a part of this research.

Thank you to Massey University for providing the Pathways Scholarship, without which I would never have considered further study.

To my husband, Jeff, thank you for understanding and always believing in me. Liam, thank you for your coffee making and wine pouring skills, and knowing when to leave me to get on with it. Tim, for your technological expertise, and calm unflappability in dealing with my technology disasters, thank you. To my dear, dear Mum and Dad; you are proof that parenting never ends. Thank you for your unwavering support and belief.

Dedication

To my students – thank you for your humour, your generosity and your curiosity, and for teaching me so much about learning.

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Chapter One Introduction

Considerable research, both nationally (Fletcher, Grimley, Greenwood, & Parkhill, 2012; Greenwood, Fletcher, Parkhill, Grimley, Bridges, Sinclair, 2009; Hattie, 2012; McNaughton, MacDonald, Amituanai-Toloa, Lai & Farry, 2006; Parkhill, Fletcher, Greenwood, Grimley & Bridges, 2008) and internationally, (Bozack, 2011; Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2007; Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, Humerick, & Littles, 2007) identifies a concerning pattern of declining motivation and engagement in reading activities, and a plateau in reading achievement for children aged between 9 and 13 years. Since intrinsic motivation to read is substantially associated with reading comprehension (Guthrie et al., 2007), ensuring that students have the appropriate learning environment to engage with texts, and the skills to comprehend them and appreciate them, is vital.

Hattie (2012) cites research from Levin, Belfield, Muennig, and Rouse (2006) stating that years in schooling is the greatest predictor of positive life outcomes, and that, between the ages of 11 and 15, many students make decisions about staying in schooling. Students in Year 8 sit within this age band, and are soon to be leaving primary school for a secondary education requiring independent literacy skills for reading and interpreting texts. Reading instruction often stops when students reach secondary school, where much of the reading they do is to gain disciplinary knowledge (C. D. Lee & Spratley, 2010; Wise, 2009). This is a potentially vulnerable stage in academic development. Students' transition into secondary education and connection with school learning will be directly affected by their ability to read effectively. Concerningly, recent research in New Zealand schools revealed that teachers believe that explicit acts of teaching reading were 'less important at this age level than at Years 3 and 4' (Greenwood et al., 2009, p.3). However, small group discussion work using explicitly taught reading strategies to examine texts closely has been found to have a long term benefit, both to reading comprehension and engagement with texts (McDonald, 2012; Schiefele, 1999).

We need to know more about how Year 8 students respond to texts and how those responses contribute to the development of comprehension, literary awareness and engagement with texts, especially considering the 'dearth' of research investigating what is actually happening in the reading classrooms of Year 8 students.

1.1 Background to the Study

In completing a Teaching as Inquiry (TAI) focus into reading with my Year 8 students, in 2013, it became apparent that the students were not 'readers', many not having completed an entire novel, in the previous year. It was difficult to encourage students to make text to text connections when they did not have a knowledge base to draw on. Math achievement in Year 7 and 8 was considerably higher than in English. I began to search for ways to help my students connect with texts and become readers.

Much of the literature identified this age group as prone to becoming what some writers termed ‘reluctant readers’ (Gallagher & Allington, 2009), and others ‘dormant readers’ (Miller, 2009). We invested in professional development for explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies (Cameron, 2009; Davis, 2007). While this was useful, it seemed to me that the students really became engaged with texts when we talked about them, particularly in small groups, with a focus on the author’s crafting of the text, aligning with the view that understanding how authors have shaped a text actually builds student interest in and engagement with text (McDonald, 2004; 2012).

To contribute to discussions, however, students needed to have ‘access’ to the text, meaning that decoding difficulties should not get in the way of reading the text. They also needed the text in front of them as we talked about it, to encourage exploring the text for evidence. This was achieved by using our read-aloud text as the basis for our literature study, and by using short extracts that were printed out for students to annotate during our discussions. Secondly, students needed a strategy to scaffold their reading of literature in a way that would promote literary discussion. The students and I developed an approach we called GIST: a four step method for close reading of texts. GIST is an ironic reference to it being a process that required us to read for more than the GIST, or the general idea, of a text. This was based upon the four guiding principles of effective close reading, described by Lehman and Roberts (2013). The students and I developed a Word Wall (Grimes, 2009) to build a shared vocabulary for talking about what we were reading. To increase reading mileage, I developed a Winter Reading Challenge. All students were challenged to read 20 novels, or novel equivalents, over the two winter terms: 20 weeks. I used Excel spreadsheet software to record daily reading, showing students' graphs of their reading progress against the progress of the term.

At the end of the first year of implementing these strategies, there was a lift in the PAT Reading Comprehension scores, whereby they were on a par with the PAT Mathematics scores. The TAI actions seemed to make a difference to student achievement. However, for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the students’ responses to text and their relationship to comprehension, and the development of literary understandings and engagement, this study was designed.

1.2 Literary Literacy

Both literacy learning and literary learning are discussed within this project. B. A. Lehman (2009) describes literary as having to do with reading literature, and literacy learning as the ability to read and write, and cautions against conflating the two terms. Comprehension strategies tend to focus on literacy skills, whereas interpretation of texts tends to focus on literary skills. B. A. Lehman (2007) shows parallels between the two by comparing the literary concept of ‘sense of story’ with the literacy concept of comprehension, the literary ‘plot’ with the literacy ‘sequence’, and the literary concept of 'language' and an author's use of language, to that of the literacy concept of 'vocabulary'. She argues both are valuable, but that 'literary literacy' gives the skills of literacy a motivating and engaging context. Thus, she and others argue, good literacy teaching requires good literature (Glaus, 2014; Moley, Bandre & George, 2011). Beers and Probst (2013) note that the more their students used their six literary signposts in reading literature, the more they used the comprehension processes of visualising, predicting, summarising, clarifying, questioning, inferring and making connections. Within this thesis, I refer to comprehension with a literacy perspective, where there is an intention to make sense of the text. Literary responses are those which are more generally concerned with an author's construction of the text. However, at times it is not useful to try to distinguish between the two, but rather to see how each response develops both literary awareness and literacy skills in conjunction with each other.

1.3 The Need for Research

As explained above, Year 8 is a critical year in the school life of students. It is also a year where students are vulnerable to switching off from reading, and where reading is under taught. Keeping students connected with reading and books requires knowing more about how students respond to texts, the complexity of interpretation students can offer, the development of comprehension, and the kinds of engagement students of this age exhibit (Parsons, Malloy, Parsons, Burrowbridge, 2015). Valuing talk and the social aspect of reading through literature discussion may lead to teachers developing stronger connections with their later primary, early adolescent readers, and, in the process, foster more positive and motivated attitudes to reading in our intermediate school classrooms (Alexander, 2005; Doddington, 2001). Understanding the relationship between literary understandings and reading comprehension may help teachers to develop classroom programmes which teach both in context, and enhance student engagement, 'Examining literature is how core knowledge about literary texts is learned. When students of all ages are given opportunities to make concrete the literary terminology in the curriculum, the secrets of how literary texts make their meaning can become clear' (McDonald, 2012, p.61/2).

1.4 Overview

This study explores the responses to literature of students in two Year 8 class groups. The questions that this research addresses are:

1. What do Year 8 students' responses to text reveal about the development of their reading comprehension?
2. What do Year 8 students' responses to text reveal about the development of their literary understandings?

Chapter Two briefly addresses the literature most relevant to the investigation. Firstly, the literature surrounding the early adolescent and the challenges and demands their desire for autonomy, peer approval and growing capacity for more abstract kinds of thinking place on the provision of curriculum and environment, is explored. The changing demands of the curriculum for students of this age are also briefly addressed. Next, reading comprehension, response to text, and developing literary understandings are described with reference to the literature; and lastly, the research supporting literature discussions as a particularly effective approach for this age group is discussed.

Chapter Three considers the methodological approaches, research design, and the particularities of the research context in this study. Analysis of the data is outlined and ethical considerations are addressed.

Chapter Four presents the results of this research in two sections. Firstly, the data from PAT Reading Comprehension assessments in March and September are briefly described to illustrate progress in Reading Comprehension over the year. Next, three illustrative case studies are described, as examples of the kinds of development in comprehension and literary understanding that these Year 8 students made over the year.

Chapter Five discusses these results with reference to the literature and to illustrative data, and describes the limitations of this study, while Chapter Six draws on these findings to identify implications of the research.

Chapter Two Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The literature review outlines some of the research regarding the early adolescent reader, central to this research. In particular, the characteristics of the early adolescent reader are described: the changing demands of reading required in the transition from primary to secondary schooling; the importance of autonomy, or self-direction, to engagement in attempting to avoid the inclination of many students of this age to put reading aside; and the increasing importance and influence of their peer group in influencing motivation to read and decisions about reading material. The next section explores literature discussions, and their role in providing a context whereby students collaborate, explore text, build comprehension and develop literary understandings. The literature with respect to literary understandings and reading comprehension is reviewed to operationalise the understandings of each, and the links between them, for the purpose of this study.

2.2 The Early Adolescent Reader

Students in Year 8 are usually 12 to 13 years old. In the midst of their schooling, they are also addressing a range of psychosocial tasks such as moving towards independence from parents, developing autonomy in decision making, self-regulation of behaviour, establishing new friendships, and dealing with complex intellectual challenges (Simmons & Carroll, 2003). Most students will be increasingly ready to interpret symbolism and language play, irony and theme, as well as being able to explore an increasing range of alternative perspectives and solutions (Goldstein, 2011). Just because they can, however, doesn't mean that they can do this independently. Students need to be taught the skills to manage this kind of interpretive reading (Fisher & Frey, 2014).

A major area of development for the early adolescent is their striving for autonomy. Research with students of this age consistently finds that students will engage and connect more with school tasks when they feel they have some control, or agency, over their learning (Moley et al., 2011; Parsons et al., 2015; Reeve, 2013) This has an enormous impact on how classroom activities and provision of content are managed, to provide learner choice. As well as being able to think in more complex ways about literature, a more abstract level of thinking means students become increasingly aware of their 'imaginary audience', or how they are seen by their peers and others (Simmons & Carroll, 2003), impacting on how early adolescent students interact in the classroom, with their teachers, peers and with learning activities (Reeve, 2013). This social context is critical to affirming or undermining motivations for reading (Coddington, 2009).

2.2.1 Reading demands on the early adolescent

Year 8 is a milestone year for New Zealand students. It is their last year in primary education, and quite often the last they will have of reading instruction (Parkhill, Fletcher, Greenwood, Grimley and

Bridges, 2013). It is almost certainly their last year of differentiated reading instruction. Students who leave primary school without the skills to read closely, and to comprehend both literally and inferentially, will struggle at secondary school (Nicholson, 1982; Wise, 2009). Despite the importance of this stage of reading development, very little research has explored how Year 8 students are taught reading, and what happens in Year 8 reading classrooms, and more particularly in New Zealand (Greenwood et al., 2009).

Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) describe three stages in literacy development. Basic literacy: foundational and focused on decoding and high frequency word knowledge; Intermediate literacy: including basic fluency and generic comprehension strategies, or processes; and Disciplinary literacy: students learn the demands that discipline specific texts put on them as a reader. Shanahan and Shanahan identify Middle School as the stage students begin to require Disciplinary literacy. Year 8 students, generally between 12 and 13 years old, fall into the early part of this age group, meaning they are transitioning from the demands of primary school reading, or Intermediate literacy, where they have been required to use literacy skills for general comprehension and basic fluency, into Disciplinary literacy (Parker-Corney, Kilpin, & Taylor, 2011). In English, this requires the ability to read narrative with a literary stance, and developing defensible interpretations; students must comprehend what they have read, and they must develop the strategies to cognitively transform that information and make it their own (Fisher & Frey, 2014).

Students often struggle with interpretive reading, not recognising that it requires a different type of reading (Lehman & Roberts, 2013; Rawson, Dunlosky, & Thiede, 2000; Wilkinson & Son, 2010). In conjunction, students at this age begin a decline in motivation at school, continuing through middle school years (Coddington, 2009). There are multiple terms for students who are capable readers, but choose not to read, including dormant readers (Miller, 2009), ambivalent or apathetic readers (Guthrie, Coddington & Wigfield, 2009) and aliterate (Brinda, 2008). Interviewing teen readers and not-readers, Strommen and Mates (2004) found that over half of the not-readers enjoyed reading until they were between 9 and 11 years of age. Students encountering increasingly complex texts are likely to meet ‘points of discouragement’ where they are vulnerable to deciding that reading is too hard for them (Fletcher et al., 2012; Grimes, 2009; Lee & Spratley, 2010). However, it is also important that all students have access to complex texts to discuss with their peers, in order to continue to develop higher level thinking about text (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Fisher and Frey (2014) recommend four text based supports to ensure that all middle school students, including those who have difficulty reading complex texts, are able to make sense of complex texts. These are close reading, annotation, discussion and writing with evidence. Close reading is an opportunity to explore reading processes, or strategies, designed specifically to develop new understandings and deeper, evidence based interpretations of texts (Lehman & Roberts, 2013; Beers & Probst, 2013).

2.2.2 Autonomy, motivation and engagement in early adolescence

The early adolescent's developing autonomy in decision making extends to students taking more control over their reading decisions than at earlier ages (Moffitt & Wartella, 1991). Parents still have some significant input into reading materials provided and attitudes to reading in the home (Klauda, 2009; Klauda & Wigfield, 2012; Ley, Schaer, & Dismukes, 1994) but, increasingly, students' peers will influence what, when and how much students read (Barry & Wentzel, 2006; Fletcher et al., 2012). Students in Year 8 are less likely to pick up books for pleasure than they were in Year 6 (Brozo et al., 2007; Ley et al., 1994). In 1996, 77% of New Zealand Year 8 students chose to read for leisure, but by 2008 only 59% of New Zealand Year 8 students reported reading as a preferred leisure activity (Fletcher et al., 2012).

Guthrie, Coddington and Wigfield (2009) describe four motivation profiles. Avid readers have high motivation to read, and low avoidance of texts. Ambivalent readers have high motivation for specific texts, but high avoidance of school reading. Apathetic readers have low motivation for independent reading, but low avoidance of school reading, and averse readers who are functionally literate, but have high avoidance of reading and low motivation to read. Bozack (2011) claimed that some motives for reading change over time, with the boys in her research sample endorsing interest, recognition, aesthetic enjoyment, and reader identity. Reading aversion sources include: task avoidance, perceived lack of control, perceived task difficulty, meaninglessness of texts, and environmental factors such as teacher over-control, difficulty of texts and reading tasks, and content irrelevance; all powerful factors in undermining motivation (Guthrie, Coddington & Wigfield, 2009). Thus, it would seem the majority of aversion sources connect strongly to the early adolescent's drive for autonomy. Opportunities for agency, to choose and make decisions about learning, appear to be particularly important in engaging early adolescent learners with reading.

Engagement is the active involvement of a student in a learning activity (Moley et al., 2011; Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Wang & Degol, 2014). Engagement is the bridge between an idea and a student, and is what transforms an activity into a meaningful learning context. Engagement is multidimensional, with behavioural, emotional and cognitive components (Wang & Degol, 2014). Reeve and Tseng (2011) additionally identify agentic engagement: students directly and intentionally impacting on the direction of a lesson or activity in the classroom.

Behavioural engagement refers to the effort, attention and commitment a student gives to a lesson, and is generally observable through time on task, task completion, voluntary participation in activities, and other positive learning behaviours (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006). When students reason, explain, justify and give evidence, they are cognitively engaged (Smart & Marshall, 2013). Emotional engagement can be inferred by student reaction to tasks, such as their interest, anxiety or happiness, and has been linked to the adolescent's need for autonomy (Park, Holloway, Arendtsz, Bempechat, & Li, 2012).

Given the research on early adolescent learners' desire to develop autonomy, it may be especially important to consider and identify agentic engagement in Year 8 classrooms. Agency is the sense of personal efficacy people have to produce and regulate events in their lives (Bandura, 1982). Reeve (2013) argues that 'agentic engagement' is a student's constructive contribution to the flow of instruction. Students engaged in this manner work with teachers to create a learning environment motivating for them as learners. These students express their preferences, ask questions and let the teacher know what they like, need and want. These students and teachers negotiate and reciprocate to proactively shape a lesson, so that it 'vitalizes [the student's] otherwise latent inner resources' (Reeve, 2013, p. 591). Reeve maintains that this 'changes the notion of a teacher's classroom motivating style away from something that resides with the teacher and toward something that, at least in part, unfolds during interaction with the students' (p.592).

Reeve and Tseng (2011) used the Hit-Steer Observation System (Fiedler, 1975) to identify verbal statements, called hits, offered to influence class activities. Compliance is called a 'steer', non-compliance a 'no-steer' and no clear consequence is a 'conditional steer'. The proportion of student hit-steers to teacher hit-steers indicates the extent to which the teacher-pupil relationship is bidirectional. Cohen (1978) states that classrooms with higher proportions of student hit-steer incidents were also classrooms with higher achievement, supporting Reeve's (2013) findings that 'agentic engagement' was positively related to student achievement. Agency and behavioural engagement in literature discussion responses can be seen in the choice of subject, redirection of dialogue, and contingent exchanges.

Motivation and engagement are inextricably linked; motivation being the desire to complete a task, and engagement the effort directed towards completing it (Wang & Degol, 2014). As students are required to read increasingly complex texts, comprehension beyond a superficial level requires commitment, and engagement with the ideas in the text (Moley et al., 2011). Early adolescent students are more likely to engage with literacy activities they perceive to be authentic, relevant, challenging, collaborative, student-directed and sustained (Parsons et al., 2015). By ensuring all students have the support required to read and make sense of a text, and to discuss it with their peers and teachers, the teacher is likely to increase motivation for students this age (Fletcher et al., 2012; Parsons et al., 2015).

Coddington (2009) discusses six motivations, paired as either affirming or undermining, for middle grade readers. These are intrinsic motivation and avoidance, self-efficacy and perceived difficulty, and prosocial and anti-social interactions. Coddington reports that one of the strongest motivators for student reading, in the middle grades, is peer acceptance. A large body of research has shown that student engagement in discussion about texts improves not only reading comprehension but, also, higher-level thinking skills and increased motivation to read (Janice F. Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Arya, 2001; McDonald, 2012; Short, 2011; Soares, 2010). During discussions, keen students model affective engagement with the task, helping to promote reading, and talking about reading, as a positive social behaviour. They also model and scaffold cognitive engagement, supporting and prompting peers into explorations of ideas (Sipe, 2008). The next section reviews reading comprehension and literary understandings, before examining the role of literature discussions in developing these in students.

2.3 Comprehension and Literary Understandings

Reading comprehension and the development of literary understandings are connected, each supporting the development of the other. There is not always a clear-cut difference between the two. Below is a table, based on B.A. Lehman's (2007; 2009) comparison of literacy and literary understandings. Not intended to be complete, it illustrates the close relationship between literacy and literary perspectives of reading. Students often make predictions about plot because they have noticed foreshadowing, or suspensive techniques the author has used. Inferences about character are made by exploring the actions they take, how they speak, and their role in the story. In building a mental representation of story structure, or story schema, students are exploring their larger fabric of experienced narrative, to compare narrative structures.

Table 1: Comparison of literacy process and literary understandings, based on Lehman (2007; 2009)

Literacy – the ability to read and understand	**Literary – conscious awareness of response to literature**
Comprehension – I can explain what's going on in this story, and why (causation).	Sense of story – I can identify some of the ways that the author has positioned me as a reader to experience this narrative.
Sequence • prediction • ordering, or reorganising information • causation	Plot • foreshadowing, suspense • structure – chronological, or out of sequence (flashback, flashforward) • connection between events
Main Ideas –specific to text • summarising • differentiating between important and unimportant information	Themes – generalisable beyond the text • life lesson • important idea to take away
Character • identify main character • characteristics • inference	Characterisation • point of view, role of narrator • role of character: protagonist, antagonist, character foil… • who is/is not heard • images/sounds/words connected with the character
Vocabulary • new words, making meaning	Language • poetic devices (simile, metaphor, alliteration, imagery…) • puns, word play

Prior Knowledge • knowledge about the world • knowledge about story structure • knowledge of the experience/setting	Intertextuality • allusion • archetypes • reference

2.3.1 Comprehension

This section of the chapter reviews the literature on reading comprehension, describing theories of how readers make sense of text, and what the implications are for teaching comprehension. Following that, responses to text, and their relationship to developing literary understandings are discussed, and some implications for teaching literary understandings are briefly described.

The human ability to understand narrative, or to comprehend the meaning of a text, relies on our ability to think recursively (Corballis, 2011). This means we are able to embed our thoughts within other thoughts, modifying, developing and refining our initial understandings either through the provision of further information in the text, or of a more critical reading of the text. When readers engage with literature, they begin a recursive process that leads to constructing a mental model of what they are reading (Kamhi, 2012).

Presuming we have the skills to decode effectively and fluently when we are reading a text, reading comprehension draws on our ability to determine propositions from written language, to manage the accumulation of these propositions in working memory, to generate inferences determining the relationship between the propositions and, from that, to generate a coherent representation, or mental model, of what was written. Comprehension requires the ability to self-monitor, checking how what we read fits with what we already know, ensuring clarity in our mental model, and clarifying what we are unsure of (Kamhi & Catts, 2012).

While it is not always clear whether what are commonly referred to as specific comprehension strategies are the processes we use to comprehend, or the product of comprehension (Wilkinson & Son, 2010), there are reading processes that good readers orchestrate to gain effective comprehension of text (Almasi & Hart, 2014; Davis, 2007; Kamhi, 2012; Pressley, 2006). Different researchers refer to these strategies by different names, but most include processes such as visualising, predicting, summarising, clarifying, questioning, inferring, and making connections (Beers & Probst, 2013). Comprehension is a complex task, and makes many cognitive demands on the reader (Pressley, 2006).

Many researchers have shown that teaching specific reading comprehension strategies, such as the processes listed above, will improve students' comprehension of a text (Davis, 2007; Guthrie et al., 2004; Palinscar and Brown, 1984; Pressley, 2006). However, there is concern that teaching strategies in isolation can mean that teachers become focused on the strategy, instead of the reading and text, and that students will not learn how to orchestrate strategies effectively, using useful strategies when they meet difficulties, and coordinating strategies that will support a deeper understanding of the text

(Davis, 2007; Wilkinson & Son, 2010). There is also debate about why the teaching of comprehension strategies is effective, since there appears to be little relationship between the number and kinds of strategies used, and the size of the effect (Wilkinson & Son, 2010). In their review of research in reading strategies instruction, Wilkinson and Son identify two alternative explanations for gains in comprehension when students are taught specific reading comprehension strategies. Firstly, they maintain that it promotes students' active engagement with texts; in other words, it gives them something specific to do with the text as they read and make sense of it. Secondly, strategies give students opportunities to engage in dialogue about the text.

While comprehension is part of a literacy perspective of reading, where the focus is on the ability to decode effectively and fluently, and to make sense of that reading (Lehman, 2009), a literary perspective asks students to explore literary elements of the text, literary structures within the text, and the author's crafting of those elements and structures. These begin with first responses to literature.

2.3.2 Response to text, and developing literary understandings

Responses to texts emerge as soon as we begin reading a narrative, as we place characters in settings and in relationship to each other. Levine (2012) proposes that naïve readers often first respond affectively to the text, liking or disliking characters, or plot turns. Sipe (2008, p.58) describes this aesthetic stance towards the text as an immediate, personal response of the individual reader: the beginning of the literary experience. He cites Rosenblatt, 'without linkage with the past experiences and present interests of the reader, the work will not 'come alive' for him, or rather, he will not be prepared to bring it to life' (1938/1996, p.112). Accordingly, the aesthetic response has the important role of engaging the reader, encouraging the reader to transact with the text, and make meaning from it. Initial thoughts, reactions, or connections are reader-based responses, occurring in a particular reader, in a particular time and place (Rosenblatt, 1994b), since the response depends on the reader's knowledge and experiences (Cliff Hodges, 2010).

The exploration of these aesthetic, reader-based, responses and elaboration of them encourages the development and construction of literary understandings (Lehman, 2007; Levine, 2014). As the reader continues into the narrative, new information adds to and refines the mental model the reader is constructing. Readers may notice a character changing, or new information about the character may alter their feeling towards the character. Plot elements may occur that the reader connects with, or cannot connect with. The reader may notice patterns from other narratives that are similar. The exploration of these noticings, and the way the author has constructed them, ascribing a positive or negative impact, and then explaining or justifying this judgement, moves the reader from an aesthetic experience of the text: reader-based responses, into an efferent experience (Rosenblatt, 1994a) of the text, interpreting the text: text-based responses (Beers & Probst, 2013; Lehman, 2007; Levine, 2014).

Combining these reader-based and text-based responses to text allows students to develop literary understandings; defensible interpretations of the text (Roser, Martinez & Wood, 2011). Sipe (2008, p.3) describes literary understandings as, ‘engaging in literary meaning making, of passionately interpreting stories with increasing sophistication, cognitive power and delight.’ Literary understandings develop from literary experiences where students are able to respond to, interpret and explore a text and have the opportunity to discuss a variety of text components such as levels of meaning, text structure, language conventions and clarity, and their connected real world knowledge and experiences. Literary understandings enable students to appreciate the construction of a narrative as well as developing deeper comprehension of a text (McDonald, 2012). Learning to become an interpretive reader takes time, and students need to have guided access into texts, becoming literary apprentices, discovering how to explore and elaborate ideas about text that engage them as readers (Levine, 2014).

2.4 Literature Discussions

Many of the responses to literature explored in this study are responses that occur within literature discussions. The discussions are collaborative since the content and direction of the discussions is determined by both the teacher and the students involved; input can be tentative, and teachers and peers ask authentic questions (Cliff Hodges, 2012). Vaughn et al. (2011) cite McKeown, Beck and Blake (2009) suggesting that extended and well-constructed discussions may be as effective, or even more effective than strategy instruction in improving students’ comprehension of texts.

Many studies have identified discussion, especially those that explore and elaborate ideas, as important to the developing understandings of readers and writers. Evidence-based approaches such as ‘Reciprocal Teaching’ (Palinscar & Brown, 1984), ‘Collaborative Strategic Reading’ (Vaughn et al., 2011), and more recently, ‘Literature Circles’ (Soares, 2010) use forms of discussion as a primary vehicle for building students’ engagement with and comprehension of texts, and high-level thinking about texts.

Eeds and Wells (1989) coined the term ‘Grand Conversations’ in their ground breaking naturalistic research, which found that young children were capable not only of discussing literature in a rich way, but also of listening to other’s views and changing their own because of that. Nussbaum (2008) argues that this is because of ‘sociocognitive conflict’, a conflict in cognition caused by the social disagreement presented by the group. When students’ conceptions are made public for scrutiny, students are given the opportunity for confirmation of or challenges to their thinking, and to reconstruct their knowledge, thereby either adding to or refining a concept held. Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) found that students whose classroom literacy experiences emphasized discussion based approaches, internalised the knowledge and skills that would enable them to participate independently in challenging literacy tasks, while Nussbaum (2008) concluded that engaging in collaborative discourse may promote deep-level understanding of content, and consolidate learning.

Applebee et al. (2003) identify aspects of discussions associated with larger improvements in performance over a year as those which use authentic questions to explore, rather than ‘testing’ understandings, time for open discussion and the free exchange of ideas between three or more participants, and more ‘uptake’, where a teacher’s questioning, is contingent, or led directly from student discourse, creating continuity and coherence. In their analysis of more and less proficient peer discussions about literature, with fourth graders, Almasi et al. (2001) identified ‘coherence’ as an important feature of more successful discussions. The three levels of coherence they identified were global coherence, where participants have a shared view of the purpose of the discussion, local coherence, whereby speakers connect with each other’s ideas and develop them, and thematic coherence, whereby there are recurring chunks or threads of conversation.

Discussion may be a particularly effective learning strategy for early adolescents, as they have developed the cognitive maturity to maintain topic coherence and recursive conversation (Almasi et al., 2001). Discussions appear to be highly engaging for students of this age, as well as developing higher-level thinking skills and increased motivation to read (McDonald, 2012; Parsons et al., 2015; Short, 2011; Soares, 2010). They also provide opportunities for students to use comprehension strategies in a flexible manner, applying not just their declarative and procedural knowledge of the strategies, but the conditions under which they should be used (Almasi & Fullerton, 2012).

2.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have described specific issues related to the learning requirements of young adolescents. Some, such as their drive to be autonomous, their increasing social awareness and need for peer approval, and their developing ability to manage complex and abstract learning, are located within the student, but have implications for the teaching and learning environment. Others are external to the student, such as the reading demands placed on students by the curriculum, an increasing need to understand more complex, discipline specific texts, and the transition from primary to secondary schooling signalling the likely end to explicit reading instruction. These external issues impact on the content and curriculum that Year 8 students will meet in the classroom, creating tension for the classroom teacher in meeting the need for early adolescents to make decisions about their learning, and meeting the external demands of the curriculum. Reading comprehension and literary understandings were described. The relationship between them was briefly addressed and then the role that literature discussions have in provoking, exploring and developing both comprehension and literary understanding was described. The next chapter describes the methodology and design of this study and the literature supporting the methodology and design.

Chapter Three Methodology

Chapter Overview

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the development of reading comprehension and literary understandings in Year 8 students, over a school year. The questions guiding the research are:

1. What do Year 8 students' responses to text reveal about the development of their reading comprehension?
2. What do Year 8 students' responses to text reveal about the development of their literary understandings?

The context explored in particular was the small group literature discussions of excerpts of class novels studied over the year. This chapter addresses the understandings determining the design used to investigate the research questions, including the use of a qualitative case study approach, and the use of practitioner inquiry (teacher-researcher) as an appropriate method for this research. Next, the research context is described, including the research site, the teacher and participants in the study, and the classroom reading programme, with particular reference to meeting the learning needs of the early adolescent. Following this, the data collection sources and methods employed are discussed. Finally, methods used for data analysis will be briefly outlined, with respect to the design of this research study.

3.1 Methodological Approach

The design of this study, and the role of the researcher, draw from the theoretical perspectives of social constructivism, interpretivism, and reader response theory.

3.1.1 Social constructivism

An underpinning belief in the design and conducting of this research is that learning is constructed within the individual, within a particular sociocultural context. Social constructivists are 'interested in the collective generation of meaning among people' (Au, 1998), valuing transactional knowledge. Social constructivists, leaning heavily on the Russian theorists Vygostsky and Bakhtin, perceive learning as an active process of 'internally persuasive discourse' (Cazden, 2001), where the learner transforms the discourse of others, and tests it, either internally, or in dialogue, and 'appropriates' the new understanding. Therefore, learning is both individual, in that the learner must make their own meaning from this experience and social because new learning comes from lived experience. Social constructivist research includes attention to motivation, agency and affect, as well as cognition and strategy (Au, 1998). Research within a social constructivist paradigm examines authentic learning activities, addressing how students acquire knowledge by building on the foundation of personal experience. From a Vygotskian perspective, 'cognitive development is studied by examining the processes that one participates in when engaged in shared endeavours and how this engagement influences other activities' (Palinscar, 2005, p.285). Constructivist researchers examine active engagement in meaning making, and 'especially knowledge constructed as a consequence of membership in a given social group' (Au, 1998, p.299). A social constructivist lens provides a way of observing learners, and the way they construct new understandings in social situations. This study uses the literature discussions of students to observe examples of developing understandings, and written reflections to observe how these students transform this discourse and make their own meanings.

3.1.2 Interpretivism

Interpretivism concentrates on the meanings people bring to situations and behaviour, and which they use to try to understand their world (Punch, 2009, p.18). Consequently, research with an interpretivist paradigm informing the design requires that participants are in settings they find usual to their normal circumstance: a naturalistic environment. It investigates the particular and specific situation. Zuniga, O'Donoghue & Clarke (2015) state that interpretivism understands reality as a social construction, meaning that there will be multiple views and understandings of any event. They cite Blackledge and Hunt (1985) in describing five major assumptions underlying interpretivism: everyday activity, freedom, meaning, interaction, and negotiation. Firstly, reality is a function of its everyday activity. Therefore, to understand a context, you must explore and understand the everyday activity of its participants, in this case the students and the teacher. Secondly, autonomy, freedom and constraints have some influence on what participants will do within a context. In a classroom, the extent to which students have autonomy and constraint is culturally bound. Interpretivism is interested in how the participants act together and create their roles within the context. In particular, this research explores how the students and teacher-researcher act together to construct new understandings about literature and shape the activities used to do so. Together, the students and teacher shape a particular meaning for narrative, comprehension and literary understandings through their interactions, routines and activities. The construction of this meaning is continuous and negotiated. Thus participants build a shared understanding of what it means to read, understand and interpret text, within this classroom context. This is particularly important to this research as the students themselves have helped to shape the learning activities and resources in the classroom and determine much of the content of literature discussions through the use of these routines. Their actions determine the learning agenda of this classroom context. For example, bringing the word cards from the Word Wall to the discussions is a routine the students established, and these word cards play a large part in determining the direction of a literature discussion.

3.1.3 Transactional perspective of reader-response theory

The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and *many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his or her response to the peculiar contribution of the text (Rosenblatt, 1994b, p. 30/31).*

The focus of this research is how students in Year 8 respond to literature, both for their understanding of text, and their interpretation of the text. Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory of reader response informs both the design and the analysis of data in this study. Rosenblatt describes the engaged reader as interacting not only with words on the page, but also with their own previous life and reading experiences, and the ways in which these connect with the text, to construct their own unique interpretations and responses to the text. Understanding reader-response as individually constructed, within a particular context, with a particular text, allows the researcher to interpret responses to text as part of a process, rather than as single and complete. Thus, reader responses will change over time, in response to others' responses, and as a response to growing understandings about the cultural code of narrative. As readers, we form our own relational reality with what we read; a reality which is more than the sum of the reader and the text (Scaife, 2012, citing Steinbeck, 2000).

Smagorinksy (2001) explains that reading is 'emplotted', situated in dialogue with and in extension to other reading. In addition, certain kinds of reading can be sanctioned over others, by those who have the greatest cultural capital. In the context of the classroom, and this research, this is the teacher, most likely. The ways in which the texts are read are often traditionally chosen by the teacher. This research is interested in the ways that students chose to read texts, and the transaction between readers reading, discussing and reflecting, creating new constructions of meaning from the text. These transactions are students' responses to text.

The literature discussions that are drawn on for many of the responses to text in this study can be seen as a vital part of the construction of student response. Students move from an initial aesthetic response to text, akin to Lehman's (2007) reader-response, where students, 'experience literature as something to be 'lived through' (Rosenblatt, 1976, cited in Soares, 2010, p. 86) to constructing a more interpretive, text-based response, drawing upon knowledge of how text is constructed (cultural structure of narrative), their prior world-knowledge and life experiences, and the shared transactions of their peers. Their written responses are one representation of the students' internalised understandings of these transactions, a small sample of how they have made sense of the knowledge they have 'appropriated' through their interaction with texts, peers and teacher, in this cultural context.

Social constructivism, interpretivism and the transactional theory of reader-response are the paradigms which inform the design of this research, the qualitative approach, and the naturalistic setting of the research. They are grounded in the ontological belief that reality is local, specific and constructed, the epistemological belief that knowledge is transactional and subjective; knowledge is a cultural artefact, and a methodological perspective that is interpretive and dialectical.

3.2 The Research Design

The case was designed to explore and describe the development of reading comprehension and literary understandings that were evidenced within the classroom programme of two Year 8 class groups. A qualitative case study methodology provides a way in which to study complex phenomena within their natural context, using a variety of data sources (Yin, 2009). In addition, it enables the researcher to explore the particular, in this case two Year 8 English class groups, and their development of reading comprehension and literary understandings over a normal year of work. The research methods were chosen for their potential to retain the naturalistic setting for the students, ensuring their responses were representative of their normal classroom practices, to allow the teacher-researcher to be an integral part of the study, and to use multiple methods of data collection to provide an in-depth window into the cultural practices of these classrooms.

3.2.1 Case study

Case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon, in depth and within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear (Yin, 2009). The case in this study is the responses to narrative of two Year 8 English classes. Three within-case subunits (Baxter & Jack, 2008) are explored in the close analysis of the progress of three individual students, over the year, to illustrate responses that are indicative of the ways students engaged with and responded to text.

Case study also allows the researcher to be an integral part of the case (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In this case, the researcher took the role of teacher-researcher, allowing a unique perspective from which to examine events (Soares, 2009), since ‘teachers who conduct research into their practice and their students’ learning are in a position – that visiting researchers are not – to see their students and their classrooms in their contextual fullness’ (Fleischer, 1994, p.88). It is an intrinsic case study, as the intention of the study is to better understand the intrinsic elements of the responses that students in these two class groups made in their ‘particularity and ordinariness’ (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p.548).

The complex context of the classroom is also highly pertinent to the phenomenon of study, as it will contribute to what students will discuss and how they will interact in discussion groups (Rubie-Davies, 2014; Soares, 2009). By retaining a ‘holistic’ view of the case, the integrity of the learning event is retained (Punch, 2009).

This research took place in a small, private, high-decile school. Ethics approval for access to the data gathered in a year’s teaching, was sought and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Appendix A). The research was designed to take place in the researcher’s two Year 8 English classes, over the normal school year. A detailed description of this classroom programme is included in the following section.

3.2.2 Quality issues

Several strategies were considered to ensure the quality of this study. This will be discussed in terms of credibility, triangulation, and trustworthiness (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Golafshani, 2003; Seale, 1999). Firstly, to consider the credibility of a study, Baxter and Jack (2008) recommend the provision of enough detail to ensure that the reader is able to build a clear picture of the environment and the phenomenon under scrutiny, and assess the credibility of the work. The following description of the classroom programme, the provision of the quantitative data from PAT Reading Comprehension assessments, and the three case studies are intended to enable the reader to build as complete an understanding of the environment and conditions of the research, as possible, and to recognise the classroom practice in place. The frequency of recording events also means that the students were very comfortable with the routine. Consequently, the recordings were a natural part of the learning environment, ensuring internal validity (Merriam, 1995). In addition, there is a strong coherence between the design of the study; the underpinning paradigms of social constructivism, interpretivism and transactional reader-response theory, and the philosophy at the heart of the classroom programme. In other words, the tools, the materials and the medium are aligned, ensuring that we are not attempting to weigh apples with a ruler; the measure is credible.

Secondly, triangulation considers the convergence of three or more data sets, to offer replication of a finding. As a researcher from a constructivist paradigm, I recognise that these different data sets offer different 'truths' for each finding, but that they converge in their source.

Seale (1999) comments that triangulation offers research scope, depth and consistency. In this research, triangulation is considered with respect to both the variety of data collected and the volume of data collected. The most voluminous data set is that of the literature discussion recordings. 40 literature discussions were audio-recorded throughout the year. The teacher-researcher transcribed each recording, usually within a week of the event, but most often within two to three days. This ensured that the event was still fresh in the researcher's mind, and that brief annotations, such as reference to books the student had recently read, or connections with other classroom lessons, could be made regarding observations of the event, in the manner of field notes. In addition, the researcher noted any particular observation, or 'noticing', briefly, after the event. In addition to the recordings, the annotated transcripts, and the 'noticings', were the written reflections that students composed after literature discussions. The PAT Reading Comprehension data offers a small quantitative data set supporting the finding that most students showed growth in their reading comprehension. The Winter Reading Challenge data helped to describe students' independent reading, and an informal student survey in September gave additional information on the students' perspectives. These strategies enabled the building of a data set that offers scope, depth and consistency, whilst also allowing the researcher to look, look and look again at each event, finding the unfamiliar in the familiar.

Trustworthiness of this research refers to credibility, described above, and the sampling and collection of data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). All students in the two Year 8 classes were offered the opportunity to take part in the research. Blind responses meant I had no knowledge of which students were, or were not, taking part in the research, for the entire school year. This meant that the research was placed in an authentic context. It was important to be alert to potential for conflict between my goals as a teacher, and as researcher. For example, when discussions were being recorded, my 'teacher' focus was to ensure that each student was given the opportunity to develop his or her understanding of the text we were discussing. As a researcher, there were certain kinds of thinking that I was hopeful would be evidenced. Listening back to transcripts helped me to monitor when I was in danger of dominating the talk, or telling the students, rather than listening to and guiding the students. Another useful tool in monitoring this was the checklist for Rigor in Talk (Beers & Probst, 2013, p.202), used when listening back to discussions, to reflect on the quality of the dialogue.

3.2.3 Ethics considerations

Merriam (1995, p.213) states that, 'in qualitative studies ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with the collection of data, dissemination of findings and, overlaying both, the researcher-participant relationship.' The research explores a teaching strategy that is part of the existing framework of the teaching of reading in my two Year 8 English classes, including the recording and analysis of classroom discussion work. Data collection was part of the normal routine of the classroom. For the purposes of ethical consideration, there was minimal impact on the learning environment of the students, but ethical consideration needed to be given to the use and reporting of data collected.

All data collected was accurate and representative, to the best of the researcher's ability. When collecting documents, researchers must consider the motivations for these documents to come into being (Punch, 2009). Documents were only collected if they contributed to the investigation of the research questions (Punch, 2009).

Principles that require consideration in the collection of data are anonymity and confidentiality. All participants in this research project were known to the researcher. Therefore, anonymity was impossible. All care was taken to ensure anonymity in reporting the data, removing identifying details and allocating pseudonyms to all of the students. Documents were also stored securely to respect the privacy of participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Within the school and the local community, the small number of participants means that it is still possible that participants, and in particular case-study students, could be identifiable. This ethical dilemma is a tension between the three key conditions of information giving: anonymity, confidentiality and openness (Tickle, 2001). The researcher carefully examined the need to include any descriptive data that had the potential to identify any participant, including the school.

Observations and recordings were available for review by student participants and the school leaders, as described by Somekh (2006). Students were always able to listen back, after a teaching session, as they would in the normal classroom programme.

3.2.4 Educated consent

Research with children must take into account the issues particularly pertaining to ethics in working with young people. Children are deemed to be those fifteen years old or younger (MUHEC, 2010). To ensure that parents and student participants had a clear understanding of the research and data collection process, an information evening for both parents and students was held to explain the research topic, what data was being used, and how impartiality during the teaching year was being ensured. An information letter (Appendix B) and consent form (Appendix C) were distributed at the evening, by the impartial teacher. Children above the age of 7 have the right to make their own decisions about participation, and have the right to withdraw at any point of the research, with no repercussions (MUHEC, 2010). Therefore, all students completed consent forms and returned them in the same envelope as the parent/caregiver return. Information was given to the students in language they would understand (Appendix D). Information letters and consent forms (Appendix E) were distributed and collected by an impartial staff member. A blind process was followed for consent to access data, with consent forms being returned in sealed envelopes, by all students, either blank (non-consent) or signed (consent). These were securely retained in the school office until the end of the school year. All Year 8 students left the school at the end of the year, further ensuring that their decision to participate or not could have no impact on their future learning experience. Every attempt was made to ensure that there was no perceived coercion from the researcher for the participants' involvement in the study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

The next section describes the context of the research, including the selection of participants, the role of the teacher-researcher, teacher stance, and the classroom programme pertinent to this research.

3.3 Context of the Research

The first consideration of the research context is the participants: the Board of Trustees, Headmaster, Year 8 students and their caregivers/parents, and the teacher-researcher, with respect to the ethics and context of the research.

3.3.1 Participants

The Headmaster and Board of Trustees of the school where the researcher currently teaches were approached to request that the research take place. Prior to approaching students and caregivers, letters of information (Appendix F) and consent (Appendix G) were sent to the Board Chair, and the Headmaster. The school is a small, private, high-decile school. Student participants in the research were two English class groups of Year 8 students. This was a convenience sampling, as the students were familiar with most of the routines used in the research, and they were the students of the researcher. Parents of the students were given letters of information and consent, through the school, as described previously. Lastly, the teacher-researcher was a significant role which supported the naturalistic inquiry approach of this research.

3.3.2 Students as participants

All Year 8 students were offered the opportunity to take part in the research. Information and consent procedures were as described above. Participants were a convenience sample of students, chosen because they were familiar with the literature discussion group routines and structures, especially that of the teacher recording the discussion. During the period that teaching and data collection took place, the teacher-researcher had no knowledge of which students were participants, and which were non-participants. The sample comprised two Year 8 class groups. Class group A had 13 students: 7 boys and 6 girls. Class group B had 14 students: 7 boys and 7 girls, although one student was away from the school for about a third of the year. At March 2014, their ages were between 11.4 and 12.5 years old. PAT Reading Comprehension Stanines ranged from Stanine 3 to Stanine 9. There was a diverse range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and one student for whom English was not their first language. All students consented, and had parent/caregiver consent, to be a part of the research.

3.3.3 Teacher-researcher

The teacher-researcher was a participant in the research. This placed an additional burden on the ethical considerations described above, and in the transparency of all procedures in the research design, collection and analysis of data, and reporting of findings. As has been previously discussed, the role of the teacher-researcher in this inquiry was intended to keep the research environment as natural as possible, to ensure that students were responding in ways in which they normally would within the classroom. In addition, idiosyncratic elements of the programme, such as GIST, and the Winter Reading Challenge Graphs were important aspects of the environment, since they were jointly constructed by the teacher and students. The context of the research will be described in detail in the next section of this chapter, firstly with respect to the teacher, and teacher stance, and then the classroom programme.

3.3.4 The teacher

I am an experienced teacher, with 25 years of teaching in a range of schools, from decile 1 to decile 9. Decile ratings measure the extent to which a schools' students live in high or low socio-economic communities, with 1 being the 10% of school in the lowest range, and 10 being the 10% of schools in the highest range. I have always had a passionate interest in children's literature, and have continued professional development through both undergraduate and post-graduate study, in conjunction with continued wide reading of children's literature. Access to new writers and writing has been actively pursued through monitoring of both national and international book awards, websites such as Goodreads, and multiple book blogs. It is vital to have a wide knowledge of children's literature to be able to draw on when discussing and promoting books and reading in the classroom (Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell, & Safford, 2009). Writers such as Donalyn Miller, Jeff Anderson, and

Kelly Gallagher have been influential in the last few years, with their shared passion for exploring literature, great writing, and getting students to read.

The cycle of reading and interacting with literature, sharing responses to literature with others, and promoting literary growth has been built in to the structure and progression of the lessons with students, which occur in a variety of ways. One of the most important aspects of the classroom programme was that we took our time with books. *The Cay*, by Theodore Taylor, is a very short novel, but we read and shared, rereading extracts from it, from September, through to November. The students became well acquainted with the novels we read as a class. Students at Year 8 are beginning to ask, 'what's in it for me?' about class work. One of my goals for the students was that they would discover the pleasure of rereading a novel. This, and other reading behaviours, such as planning books To Be Read (TBR's) and learning about personal reading preferences, are crucial to developing life-long readers.

3.3.5 The classroom

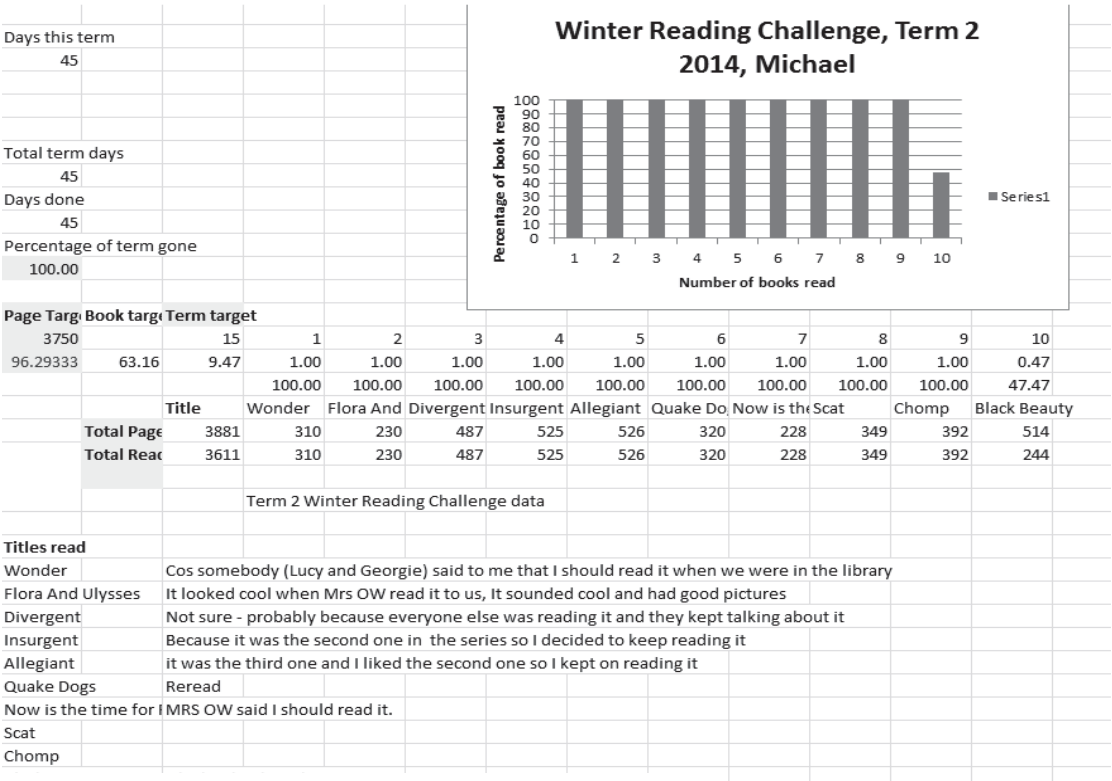
First and foremost, the classroom is a reading environment, with around 800 to 1000 books in it at any one time, and around 50 – 100 books a year added to the classroom library. This is partly possible because the structure of our school means that I am a specialist English teacher. I have read most of the books, so that I am able to talk about them with the students as they read them. It also means that I can quickly check, with one or two questions, whether they have actually read the book! While there is some non-fiction, the majority of the books are fiction, with a range of picture books, simple chapter books and more challenging chapter books. The students have no 'check out' procedures for the books. It is a library with no fines. Children at intermediate school age are most likely to start reading a recommended book if they are given the book immediately. They are more likely to choose from a range of books if the books are in front of them to choose from (Serafini, 2011). There is no opportunity for a student not to have something to read, in the classroom. Reading is something we do, regularly. Below, the classroom programme is discussed as part of the literary cycle of reading and interaction with literature, promoting literary growth, and sharing responses to literature with other students (Lehman, 2007).

3.3.6 The classroom programme – reading and interacting with literature

This section describes the independent reading programme, the Winter Reading Challenge, and classroom read-alouds, as strategies to ensure students are engaged with reading and interacting with literature.

3.3.6.1 Independent Reading and the Winter Reading Challenge

The students are given 15 – 20 minutes independent reading time at the beginning of an English lesson, at least three times a week. This is not a silent reading time; it is an opportunity to read (Guthrie, Shafer & Huang, 2001) and an opportunity to select a new book independently, and/or with teacher/peer guidance. Students are expected to complete 20 minutes reading at least four nights a week, for homework. Many times, the first five minutes of a lesson is swapping and comparing books. Students rush to put their names on the graffiti board, a white board with book titles and lists of students wanting to read them, instigated and perpetuated by the students, for popular titles.



Days this term												
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100.00												
Page Targ	**Book targ**	**Term target**										
3750		15	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
96.29333	63.16	9.47	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.47
			100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	47.47
		Title	Wonder	Flora And	Divergent	Insurgent	Allegiant	Quake Do	Now is the	Scat	Chomp	Black Beauty
	Total Page	3881	310	230	487	525	526	320	228	349	392	514
	Total Reac	3611	310	230	487	525	526	320	228	349	392	244
			Term 2 Winter Reading Challenge data									
Titles read												
Wonder		Cos somebody (Lucy and Georgie) said to me that I should read it when we were in the library										
Flora And Ulysses		It looked cool when Mrs OW read it to us, It sounded cool and had good pictures										
Divergent		Not sure - probably because everyone else was reading it and they kept talking about it										
Insurgent		Because it was the second one in the series so I decided to keep reading it										
Allegiant		it was the third one and I liked the second one so I kept on reading it										
Quake Dogs		Reread										
Now is the time for I		MRS OW said I should read it.										
Scat												
Chomp												

Figure 1: Michael's Winter Reading Challenge Graph, Term 2

The Winter Reading Challenge is a challenge for Year 8 students to read the equivalent of 20 books over Terms 2 and 3. The teacher had discretion over what counted as a book for each reader, but the students were encouraged to include at least one ‘book’ per term in the form of a collection of picture books. The students and I negotiated that 250 pages was equivalent to a novel, meaning students who like to read longer books were not disadvantaged. Winter Reading Challenge Graphs (WRCG) were updated by the teacher, during independent reading time. Students’ graphs were projected on to the whiteboard and updates occurred informally, across the classroom. Information was recorded in graphs, such as Michael’s above, so that students knew how they were progressing towards their Winter Reading Challenge. This target was moderated during the term, although it was never lowered. A new target was set for Term 3, and Term 4 if necessary, and term totals were added for the Winter Reading Challenge. Completing the challenge earned students a badge for their blazers.

While the overt goal of the graph update was to record students' independent reading, there were many reasons for completing the graphs publicly, and while students were reading. Firstly, it helped me to know what students were reading, how students were reading, and why they chose to read what they were reading. Students dislike filling in reading logs, and the information in them is rarely shared with peers. Filling out 'reading logs' electronically, in a social environment, made the reading log both purposeful and interactive. The discussions ensured that readers had some accountability for what they were listing as read.

Through these discussions, students developed a network of like-minded readers, and started planning what they would read next, or TBR lists, both characteristic of voracious readers (Marino & Moylan, 1994). At this age, peer recommendations are often more highly valued than teacher or parent recommendations (Barry & Wentzel, 2006).

Apathetic and ambivalent readers, as described previously, appeared to find the graph useful as it clearly charted their progress through a book. Many of the students read more than one book at a time, and the graphs helped them to manage that. Students became more aware of their reading preferences, both in content and behaviours, enabling better book selection and goal setting. Whilst updating graphs, I could identify students who started many books, and completed few, and put strategies into place for book completion.

The collection of data gained through the WRCG also helped to drive the book buying for the classroom, as books and authors enjoyed by students were easily identified. At times, it even helped to decide what the next class read aloud book might be, as it did with *The Cay*; once Elijah had noted it was a bit scary, the class clamoured for it.

The Winter Reading Challenge provided frameworks for choice, ownership, relevance, success and social collaboration for the students as readers. They decided what to read, set and modify their own targets, chose books for the class library, helped determine the class read-alouds, tracked achievement, and became a community of readers who talked about books, swapped books and planned their reading. These are practices which have been shown to impact on reading motivation (McRea & Guthrie, 2009; Serafini, 2011) and align well with the early adolescent's developing autonomy (Moley et al., 2011; Parsons et al., 2015; Reeve, 2013).

3.3.6.2 Read-Alouds

Good books lead to good conversation (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013), so text choice is critical. To help determine the complexity of the book, the Rubric for Qualitative Analysis of Text Complexity (Appendix H) was used. Read-aloud texts were important to the classroom programme for a variety of reasons. They ensured that all students had access to texts worthy of discussion and reflection, whether or not they could read them independently. Read-alouds provided a shared literature to support intertextual connections over the year and introduced literature to students that they would not necessarily have chosen for themselves. They also provided a positive reading experience for most students (Parsons et al., 2015). These shared novels often formed the basis of material chosen for GIST reading, an instructional approach that will be covered in the Promoting

Literary Growth section of this description. Texts covered over the teaching year in this research were *Holes*, by Louis Sachar, *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo, *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor, and excerpts from *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, used alongside the 1962 film of the same title, directed by Robert Mulligan. Other books were used with smaller groups, and are referred to in the Results Chapter. A full list of novels referred to in this research is in the Appendix (Appendix I).

The first novel of the year is always *Holes*, by Louis Sachar. In my experience, it has a very high level of engagement from students, and boys in particular. *Holes* becomes an overarching text for the year. It is a book that offers structural complexity, and yet is approachable. Students each have a copy of this novel, but don't usually bring it to the read-aloud session. There are few interruptions, because this is our aesthetic reading (B. A. Lehman, 2007; Rosenblatt, 1994b). Interruptions occur when words need to be explained, or when a student has a question. After listening, response activities are brief and could be written, oral or visual.

3.3.7 The classroom programme – promoting literary growth

In this section, the process of GIST reading is described and supporting activities, such as the Word Wall, and Micro Close Reading, are briefly addressed. The purpose of these activities is to build reading comprehension and interpretation of text processes and strategies, promoting literary growth.

3.3.7.1 GIST Reading - Close Reading

Many young readers do not realise that we read in different ways for different purposes (Lehman & Roberts, 2013). They expect to be able to read a piece, gain the 'gist' of it, and then answer questions about it, or respond to it, without referring back to the text. GIST reading is an approach we use in this classroom to help develop routines for reading closely, independently. GIST is a mnemonic to remember the four steps to effective close reading of a text: General Idea, Identify, Specify, Tell Me Why.

1. **G – General Idea** –the first reading of a text. Main reflective questions while reading are, what is going on? Who is here?
2. **I** – **Identify –** may begin on first reading, but usually takes at least a second reading to do effectively. Students have a pink-for-think highlighter, and a green-for-go highlighter. As they read, they pink highlight words they need to check the meaning of, or ideas they need to think about, and green highlight anything that appeals: a literary device, a connection, or a word. The main reflective question is 'what do you notice?'

After the first two steps, students often bring their annotations to a literature discussion group, to facilitate their input into the discussion.

3. **S – Specify –** students now examine their highlighting and try to identify what they have noticed, annotating the text as they do so. The reflective question is 'why did this make

me wonder?' Green-for-go highlightings are further examined to see if they are an example of a literary device. The main reflective questions are 'have I seen examples of this before?' and 'what do I like about this?'

4. **T – Tell Me Why –** This means, 'why did the author do that?' Why use melancholy instead of sad? Why write in dialect when it is difficult to read? Why did the author use a shark simile? Why are there so many versions of holes in *Holes*? The reflective question is, 'what does this do to me as a reader?'

GIST is taught to the students using a gradual release of responsibility framework of modelling, sharing, guiding and then in small groups, pairs or independently (Cameron, 2009; Fisher and Frey, 2014) and is aligned with Fisher and Frey's (2014) recommendations for close reading: rereading, annotation, discussion and writing with evidence. Fisher and Frey maintain that these processes support middle school students in transitioning to higher level thinking about texts. Several students asked, when they were completing PROBE2 assessments at the end of the year, if they could read with highlighters, indicating they did indeed find the process supportive.

GIST is an integral part of the preparation for literature discussions. In the example of GIST reading in Figure 2 (p.37), Sarah has participated in a Literature Discussion. Prior to the discussion, she completed her G – General Reading, and then she completed her I – Identify Reading, highlighting in pink and green. Next, she came to the literature discussion, as this gave her an opportunity to raise questions, and hear other students' ideas. On the way to the literature discussion, she selected word cards from the Word Wall, described in the next section, to share with the group. After the Literature Discussion, she filled out the S – Specify, and T – Tell Me Why steps of her reading. Using this as a reflective exercise meant that she may be able to add ideas she had not originally thought of, building an increasingly considered response to the text.

The annotated documents developed by each student become a useful planning document for writing any responses in a more formal way. They were useful to me, as a teacher, when students came to the Literature Discussions, as I could quickly see patterns of either green or pink responses on their close reading extracts. The highlighting helped the students consider which words they might select from the Word Wall to bring to the literature discussion.