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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
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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.

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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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