


# Exploring a contemporary picturebook with young readers in the foundation phase

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**Background:** Given the ongoing literacy crisis in South Africa, there is a need for teachers, as well as teacher education programmes, to explore various means to enable learners to develop reading comprehension. This study sought to examine the intricacies of a series of small group literacy activities that hinged on the in-depth and repeated engagement with a contemporary picturebook. Furthermore, it aims to evaluate whether children can develop an affinity for these books.

**Aim:** The aim of the study was to explore the ways young readers engage with a contemporary picturebook by way of their oral and painted responses.

**Setting:** The study was a qualitative case study, which took place at an urban public school in the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg.

**Methods:** The research design followed that of a case study. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews during two paired readings, as well as a focus group discussion (FGD). Additional data were collected through children's painted artefacts and their subsequent individual interviews on these paintings.

**Results:** The findings indicate that learners initially had superficial verbal engagements with the picturebook, which was complemented by more creative responses on further readings. Another finding was that the facilitation by the researcher and the interaction with peers improved the learners' depth of engagement. Lastly, the learners' initial basic descriptions of what was visible was complemented by a more nuanced appreciation of the aesthetic features of the picturebook.

**Conclusion:** Based on the findings, it is concluded that full depth of picturebooks and their affordances in classroom literacy programmes be introduced in detail to pre-service and in-service teachers in order to foster rich and meaningful reading experiences for learners.

**Contributions:** This research functions to contribute to the limited body of literature surrounding children's reading experiences of picturebooks and overall learning specifically in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Picturebook; children's literature; literary understanding; literacy; foundation phase; South Africa.

## Introduction

The genre of picturebooks is a burgeoning field in children's literature. Nodelman (1988), Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), as well as Sipe (1998), have written critically on the nature of these books and they have developed theories on how best to examine them. Picturebooks are conceptualised as artistic, literary, semiotic, and multimodal artifacts (Serafini & Reid 2022:2), which offer a multifaceted reading experience. The role picturebooks can play in classrooms is not fully understood by educational stakeholders who are not specialists in this field and as such the full potential of these texts has not yet been tapped. Murriss and Ranchod (2015) write about how an orientation towards a pedagogy of picturebooks could be the solution for the South African literacy crisis.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) has shown that since 2006 South African Grade 4 learners perform poorly with regard to reading comprehension. Howie et al. (2012) indicate that complex reading skills such as inferential thinking are introduced to South African learners at a later stage in their schooling and teachers spend additional time on more basic reading skills. Murriss and Ranchod (2015) argue that complex reading skills such as

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inferential thinking and critical thinking – those evaluated in the PIRLS assessments – can be developed in a community of enquiry through the use of picturebooks. These scholars believe that ‘comprehension should be strengthened through literacy approaches that emphasise meaning-making, critical thinking and communication’ (Murriss & Ranchod 2015:3), because as children are engaged in thought, articulating these thoughts, responding to the thoughts of others, and initiating ideas, they are participating in intelligent and proactive reading habits.

From my own experiences as a foundation phase teacher and lecturer in a pre-service teacher education programme, I know that it is not common for teachers to explore the complexity and the beauty of picturebooks. I have rarely witnessed an analysis of the relationship between words and images on a page opening, or an exploration of some of the pictures’ depth in relation to the meaning in the words. This may be because of pre-existing notions that children cannot understand these nuances, and, as a result, children are not given the opportunity to engage with potentially enriching complexity. Nodelman (1996), as cited in Wolf (2004:16) believes that assumptions held by adults about children have the potential to become ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’. In this study, I propose that children can develop an affinity for nuanced, and even complex picturebooks; furthermore, I contend that this experience can be a foundation for their future reading development. In addition, through their engagement with a contemporary picturebook, I believe that children can develop literary competence, a key aspect of reading comprehension. If granted access to sophisticated texts, as well as the opportunity to interact extensively with them, children can become sophisticated readers who can appreciate the art of the images alongside the art of the words. As emphasised by Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed. 2017:4), existing research on picturebooks explains the ‘crucial role of the picturebook in the child’s developing cognitive, linguistic, moral, and aesthetic capacities’.

I identify the following research problem: young readers are seldom given the opportunity to encounter dynamic, imaginative picturebooks. This deprives them of early experiences of aesthetic, illustrated language text, which could be a precursor to a rich reading pathway in school and elsewhere. The often-mentioned lack of a reading culture in the South African context (Du Toit 2014) could be partially ameliorated by teaching young readers to read not only for lexical meaning (Pretorius & Spaull 2016) but also to interpret beautiful illustrations with beautiful words. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how children in the foundation phase, specifically Grade 3 learners, can interact with a contemporary picturebook with significant imagery, as well as complex thematical concepts.

The research reported in this article addresses the question ‘How do Grade 3 learners engage with a contemporary picturebook?’. The picturebook used was *The Extraordinary Gardener* (Boughton 2018), written and illustrated by Sam

Boughton. The aim of the study was to explore the extent to which young readers engage with a contemporary picturebook by way of their oral responses and their painted responses. More specifically, the study sought to explore what was possible when young readers were free to engage with a picturebook by way of multiple approaches, including a paired reading, a read-aloud and group discussion, and through their own paintings. The objectives were to:

- Investigate what semiotic and meaning-making resources children drew on when reading a contemporary picturebook.
- Explore how the presence of the researcher impacted the children’s engagement with the picturebook.
- Capture their thoughts, emotions and perceptions about the picturebook, as well as to understand their perception of the relationship between words and images in the picturebook.
- Describe the children’s responses to the picturebook after multiple engagements.

## Literature review

Picturebooks are a unique genre in that they consist of ‘two signifying systems’ (Arizpe & Styles 2002:119). They are regarded as multimodal texts as the words and the images intersect, coming together synergistically to ‘produce an effect that is greater than the effect that either would produce alone, resulting in an aesthetic whole that is greater than the sum of the individual parts’ (Sipe 2008a:23). Prominent scholars in the field, namely Bader (1976), Kiefer (1995), Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), as well as Sipe (1998), have amalgamated the words ‘picture’ and ‘books’ to form one word in order to emphasise the uniqueness of the genre of *picturebooks*. This amalgamation of the terms ‘picture’ and ‘book’ was intended to distinguish the genre from other children’s books, many of which have a significant inclusion of images (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer 2013). This view of picturebooks prioritises the form of the genre, which aims to create a literary and an aesthetic experience during the reading process (Lewis 2001). The aforementioned scholars argue that thinking of picturebooks as two separate entities of words and images does a disservice to the genre.

In *How Picturebooks Work*, Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) detail the ways in which words and images interact on a page. These can be:

- symmetrical interactions, where images represent the same meaning as the words;
- complementary interactions, where either words or images supplement each other’s shortfalls;
- enhancement interactions, where pictures enhance the meaning of words and vice versa;
- counterpoint interactions, where the words and images can convey meaning extended beyond individual meaning;
- contradiction between words and images, which occurs through ambiguity of the words and images (2001:12).

Picturebooks therefore present complexity and duality for young readers to not only conjoin picture and word but also have an aesthetic and literary experience while doing so.

In most cases, picturebooks are children's entry point into literacy (Arizpe & Styles 2002). Nikolajeva (2013) and Arizpe and Styles (2016) have found that children's literature has evolved towards complexity; the expanding nature of picturebooks is as a result of the growing international market for these books (ed. Kümmerling-Meibauer 2017). Books in this genre span topics and artistic styles, and this broadening has increased the audience for these books. Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed. 2017:1) explains that because of this growth, 'artists have developed techniques and strategies that drive the readers' sensations, thoughts, and feelings so that the story line and the intricate picture-text relationship keep them riveted to the page'. This boom is also a result of the rise in visual communication. Preceding the rapid increase in visual communication in the 21st century, scholars such as Nodelman (1988), Kiefer (1995), and Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) underscored the need for young learners to be taught how to decode visual messaging. These authors proposed the need for explicit instruction of 'visual literacy', which can be undertaken through the use of picturebooks. Kiefer (1995:7) foregrounds that the 'opportunities for developing literacy, [as well as] literary and aesthetic understanding through picturebooks are tremendous'. The lives of children, especially in the 21st century, are immersed in visual communication; therefore, the prospects of enhancing their understanding of visual information should not be disregarded (Supsakova 2016).

Limited in the literature is the study of South African children's meaningful engagement with picturebooks. Murris and Ranchod (2015) and Murris and Thompson (2016) write about how they have used picturebooks with learners in the foundation phase for a specific methodology of teaching philosophy to children. They observed that children in classroom settings were able to provide philosophical and insightful responses to picturebooks. However, such studies are limited. Pantaleo (2019:1) states that '[t]he complexity of the picturebook format requires and rewards slow looking by readers/viewers'. As a result of constraints in the South African curriculum, children are seldom given the chance to slowly look and slowly read picturebooks. Consequently, their understanding of picturebooks remains superficial.

In my experience, classroom reading of picturebooks is a somewhat mechanical phenomenon, characterised by little opportunity for children to learn how to appreciate the genre as an aesthetic experience, to learn new words, new concepts, and ways of engaging. Children do not get to experience beautifully written and illustrated stories enough, and teachers limit their engagement with picturebooks to either a once-off aural experience by reading to children, or for the development of learners' reading skills by having a visual experience when reading the book. When we reflect on the nature of the early grade reader books available in certain South African classrooms, the differences between early

readers and picturebooks become prominent. According to Hoffman, Teale and Yokota (2015), picturebooks can have alternative purposes such as literary experiences, aesthetic experiences, as well as knowledge-making experiences. If a book is aesthetically appealing and if the content has, for example, some interesting mathematical concepts, a young reader can acquire important content knowledge while having a literary experience. Graded readers fulfil the primary purpose of developing children's reading ability and often display a simplistic word-image relationship (Murris & Thompson 2016). The purpose of such direct, clear alignment of words and sentences with drawings is that children in the 'learning to read' stage can use the images to guide them in their decoding of words. Picturebooks, however, denote a more dynamic word-image relationship and work to offer readers a more integrated reading experience (Haynes & Murris 2012; Murris & Thompson 2016). While it is important to distinguish between picturebooks and graded readers, I argue that reading material available in South African classrooms, and the ways in which they are used, do not stimulate readers and spark their interest in reading. Given that children have the capacity to become sophisticated readers of picturebooks (Arizpe & Styles 2002, 2016), they miss out on the aesthetics of reading in childhood if they are only given access to simplistic books that do not amplify their capacity to engage with complex text. The South African educational sector is one where the cognitive and emotional potential of picturebooks is undermined. Van Renen (2008) explains that teaching reading using graded readers places a heavy focus on the written text and this creates the impression that meaning comes only from the written text.

## Children's responses to picturebooks

Several qualitative studies have examined how children engage with picturebooks (Arizpe & Styles 2002, 2016; Kiefer 1995; Maderazo et al. 2010, 2012; Pantaleo 2008, 2014, 2017; Sipe 2008a). According to Campagnaro (2015):

These studies show that visual narration creates a shared space which affords the possibility of discussion with children and can thereby stimulate a deeper understanding of the fictional universe and the real world. (pp. 121–122)

In addition, these authors demonstrate that the visual and aesthetic literacy of a child can be developed through the reading of picturebooks. A few studies have looked at children's critical thinking being developed through picturebooks (Pantaleo 2017; Roche 2015; Vasquez 2010).

## Picturebooks as pedagogy

Martens et al. (2012) argue that teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of the potential of picturebooks or of how to begin teaching about artistic elements. Their study provides guidelines on how to discuss art concepts in classroom settings. Pantaleo (2017) also explains how to provide children with the metalanguage for discussing art elements in picturebooks in order to deepen their engagement. Roche

(2015) believes that teachers should be carefully guided on how to use picturebooks in classrooms for various uses. Roche (2015) provides guidelines for a dialogic pedagogy involving picturebooks. She writes about how, as a teacher, she had to practise using a picturebook to develop critical thinking in ways that allowed children to deepen their understanding of the book. The benefits of engaging with picturebooks are not exclusive to preschool and foundation phase children (Kiefer 1995; Van Renen 2008). The critical thinking and book talk pedagogy uses shared reading practises with a specific focus on discussing ideas. Shared construction of meaning occurs when children are given the opportunity to engage in dialogue and discussion about picturebooks. As Bohm (1998:2) aptly explains, when we co-create knowledge there is 'a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us'. This collective contribution to knowledge is not only evident in society but also in the community of a classroom.

Picturebooks can be used to engage children in critical thinking and philosophical thinking and reasoning in the classroom. A pedagogy of picturebooks can be taken up by teachers where a particular concept is discussed, which usually involves thematic elements in the picturebook. Studies conducted by Murriss (2013), Murriss and Ranchod (2015) and Murriss and Thompson (2016) explain that using picturebooks to generate philosophical discussions in classrooms involves the teacher as a participant who guides the dialogue in non-invasive ways. This approach results in collaborative learning where the teacher creates knowledge *with* the learners with a focus on 'authentic dialogue' (Roche 2015:49).

When teachers adopt this pedagogy of engaging learners in dialogue on a picturebook, they are creating a 'community of readers' (Braid & Finch 2015:120). In this way, the classroom community can go deeper into the issues raised by learners and the teacher can move away from the common and superficial reading practices commonly seen in classrooms (Murriss & Ranchod 2015). Through this pedagogy, the teacher along with the learners participate in 'responsive listening' (Murriss & Ranchod 2015:8).

### Picturebooks and the South African reading context

Much research in South Africa reports on a shortage of books for children. The PIRLS (2016) is one such study that shows the significant shortage of books in schools and in homes. Studies conducted by Statistics South Africa underline a lack of reading culture where parents hardly read to their children, and a large proportion of adults indicate that they themselves do not read for leisure (McBride n.d.). Le Roux (2020:1) writes about the problematic notion of the term 'book famine', which has been identified as pervasive in South Africa. While the term itself is contested (Le Roux 2020), it is useful to describe the state of South African picturebooks and that South African children are famished in relation to engaging with picturebooks written by South African authors and available in the 11 official languages (Le Roux & Costandius 2012; Snyman 2015). An example of a 'book famine' is illuminated in the General Household

Survey (2018) by Statistics South Africa, which indicated that 46.8% of children nationally have never read a book with a parent or caregiver. This state of scarcity can be applied to a lack of reading material available for children in households and schools, a lack of stimulating reading material available for learners in schools, a lack of quality reading practice that occurs in both households and schools, and a lack of access. In order to develop a reading culture, which can offer significant literacy benefits, children in South Africa require access to books. Extending my argument further, children also need access to stimulating and engaging books that will increase their reading habits by increasing their enjoyment of and motivation to read.

## Conceptual framework: Literary understanding

Sipe's (2000) work titled *The Construction of Literary Understanding by First and Second Graders in Oral Response to Picture Storybook Read-Alouds* focuses on the socially constructed literary understanding by children aged 6 and 7. The conceptual framework proposed by Sipe (2000) forms a central part of the framework for this study. Sipe's framework offers a comprehensive extension of reader response theory with a particular emphasis on children's responses to picturebooks.

Sipe (2008a) suggests that when children are engaged in a picturebook reading and specifically read-alouds facilitated by a teacher, they respond in five different ways. He argues that these responses are enactments of three impulses, namely the 'hermeneutic impulse ... the personalising impulse, [and the] aesthetic impulse' (Sipe 2000:270). The hermeneutic impulse is characterised by the desire to understand the story. The personal impulse is the need to relate the story to one's personal life. Lastly, the aesthetic impulse is seen when the reader responds as though they are in the story or when they use the story for their own creative expression (Braid & Finch 2015; Sipe 2000; Van der Pol 2012; Wolfenbarger & Sipe 2007).

The five responses that represent literary understanding are considered equally important, but can only be expressed when teachers allow opportunity for such engagement (Sipe 2000). The categories are: analytical, intertextual, personal, transparent, and performative (Sipe 2000:264); and they represent the differing forms of literary understanding into which children's responses can be categorised. Of these five categories, Sipe (2000:268–269) describes the ways each could be explained by the '[s]tances assumed by the children, or as [a]ctions performed by the children, or in terms of the various functions served by the texts'.

Figure 1 provides a summary of Sipe's (2000) literary understanding framework.

## Research methods and design

The research reported in this article sought to address the question 'how do Grade 3 learners engage with a



Impulse	Response	Stance (How children situate themselves in relation to texts)	Action (What children do with texts)	Function (How texts functions)
Hermeneutic impulse	Analytical response	Within texts	Children analyse	Using texts as objects
	Dealing with the text as an object or cultural product. Children stay within the text and make comments that reflect an analytical stance.			
	Intertextual response	Across texts	Children link or relate	Using texts as context
	Relating the texts being read to other cultural products. The text is understood in the context of other texts, functioning as an element in a matrix of interrelated texts.			
Personalising impulse	Personal response	To or from texts	Children personalise	Using texts as stimuli
	Connecting the text to one's own life, moving either from the life to the text or from the text to one's life. The text acts as a stimulus for a personal connection.			
Aesthetic impulse	Transparent response	To or from texts	Children personalise	Using texts as stimuli
	Entering the world of the story and becoming one with it. The story world becomes (momentarily) identical with and transparent to the children's world.			
	Performative response	Through texts	Children merge with texts	Using texts as their identity
	Entering the text world and manipulating it for one's own purpose. The text functions as a platform for children's creativity becoming a playground for a carnivalesque romp.			

Source: Sipe, L.R., 2000, 'The construction of literary understanding by first and second graders in oral response to picture storybook read-alouds', *Reading Research Quarterly* 35(2), 252–275. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.35.2.4>

**FIGURE 1:** Categories of responses for literary understanding.

contemporary picturebook?'. In the design of the study, I considered the characteristics of case studies generally (Stake 2005; Yin 2013). A case study is an approach where a phenomenon is studied in depth and makes use of 'thick descriptions', which are 'complete and literal descriptions of the incident' (Merriam 2009:43). Merriam (2009:40) describes a case study as a deep-dive analysis of a 'bounded system'. This research has a bounded system of a particular group of 11 children engaging with a particular picturebook. Case studies also typically have a 'unit of analysis' (Merriam 2009:48), which provides the parameters of the case in terms of its central construct. The unit of analysis in this study is children's engagement with a particular picturebook. A case study design allowed me to investigate how children interact with a contemporary picturebook in order to best understand what influences their reading process, what informs their meaning-making, and how they come to understand the text as a dynamic interplay of words and images.

This research can therefore be termed 'interpretive-descriptive research' (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:40) where data were gathered by participants' words and explanations as a primary source of data collection. Thus, on this view, a qualitative case study research design involves 'the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive' (Merriam 2009:39).

## Sampling

In an attempt to best respond to the research question, a particular group of children were purposefully/purposively selected for their ability to 'inform an understanding of the research problem' (Creswell 2007:125). In order to achieve a fair spread, a sample of six girls and five boys were selected. Also, having a range of reading ability levels helped to avoid any bias in the data gathered and to fulfil the reading strategy of a paired reading. The learners' class teacher advised me on who the stronger and weaker readers were, and this information allowed me to pair the learners effectively, where a stronger reader was paired with a weaker reader.

## Data collection

Multiple data collection methods contributed to my understanding of how children engaged with a contemporary picturebook. I employed dyad interviews during the learners' paired reading, as well as focus group interviews, and documents in the form of painted artefacts. The proposed study was to use a contemporary picturebook with striking illustrations and a rich vocabulary. *The Extraordinary Gardener* by Boughton (2018) is a picturebook where the interaction between text and image is complex, with rich words and images. I argue that this picturebook contains elements that elicit a visceral reading experience such as illustrative written text and striking pictorial text.

## Data analysis

Inductive data analysis is described as a 'bottom up' approach to finding categories and themes in the data (Creswell 2007:38). Theories relating to picturebooks are not widely known, especially those relating to how children engage with a contemporary picturebook. It is important to consider that this study is underpinned by existing picturebook theory as a framework, but has not incorporated a deductive process of gathering data in relation to the theoretical framework. This study was, however, informed by existing knowledge in the discipline of picturebooks studies and aimed to contribute to emerging knowledge on how children engage with picturebooks.

The data, including all transcribed interviews and painted responses were analysed applying the constant comparative analysis method suggested by Maykut and Morehouse (1994). Analysing the data began with 'open coding' (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004:104) where a sense of the content was established and interesting insights were identified. The data were then analysed in relation to the unit of analysis – this being children's engagement with the picturebook – to assign codes and eventually form categories.

All data were clearly labelled using suitable pseudonyms and specific labels for the different interviews. For instance, the labelling system as detailed in Figure 2 was used for the codes.

All the codes were compiled and placed in a table. For an overall view of what was done with all learners individually, I placed their names at the top of the document and placed an X next to the code that applied to the learner. This allowed me to see what was done frequently by the learners and to pick up on any patterns. Following the revision and consolidation of codes, I then decided on a final, more comprehensive name for the code and applied it to all

Cl & Si	Clive and Sipiwe (participants' names)
R1	Paired reading 1
3	Page number
71–78	Line numbers

Note: Please see the full reference list of the article, Phekani, M.N., 2023, 'Exploring a contemporary picturebook with young readers in the foundation phase', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 13(1), a1290. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v13i1.1290>, for more information

**FIGURE 2:** Labelling system of code in Figure 3.

similar 'look/feel-alike data' (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:125). Upon further revision of the categories, I grouped similar data together so that ideas that speak to the same phenomenon were placed in succession as far as possible. This allowed for me to clearly see patterns and to begin formulating categories.

From the five sets of data used in this study (Data Set 1: Individual engagement; Data Set 2: Paired engagement; Data Set 3: Read-aloud and group discussion; Data Set 4: Learners' paintings; and Data Set 5: Individual interviews), I was able to formulate 26 categories across the data sets. Figure 3 provides an example of how a code was captured under a category.

## Ethical considerations

Consent was obtained from the parents of the participants and assent was obtained from the young participants. Permission was also obtained from the school principal. Ethical clearance was granted through the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee. (No. Sem 2-2019-037).

Participants were informed of the study and their voluntary participation was obtained. I received assent from the children as they are minors and cannot provide formal consent. However, participants' parents or caregivers gave full informed consent by way of a consent form. The consent form detailed the purpose of the study; it made clear their voluntary participation and their ability to withdraw at any time. It also explained the data collection processes in an understandable way.

All data were video recorded, for which written permission was also provided. The nature of the research question requires that I see children's verbal and non-verbal communication and so participants' faces were captured on camera. These observations were transcribed while ensuring anonymity through the use of pseudonyms for each child. It was and still is my responsibility to protect the children from harm and so anonymity has been prioritised.

## Results

The data analysis process generated three overarching themes about how children engaged with a contemporary picturebook. These are presented in the sections that follow.

Category 1: Learners tended to point and name objects and actions that were immediately visible during initial readings											
	Clive	Sipiwe	Amu	Omolemo	Andrew	Grace	Cole	Gamu	Sara	Ompha	Frank
Pointing and naming (objects, actions of characters)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

**FIGURE 3:** Extract from Category 1: Learners tended to point and name objects and actions that were immediately visible during initial readings.

## The initially superficial verbal engagement with the picturebook was complemented by more nuanced, inferential and creative responses on further readings

The analysis of the learners' verbal responses shows that learners' engagement was initially superficial. Learners tended to point and name objects and actions that were immediately visible. The following example from the raw data illustrates this:

Researcher: What do you notice about these pages?

Amu: It's rainy and it's sunny at the same time. There's two suns.

Researcher: Why do you think that is?

Amu: This one is saying it's a small tree then it's a big one.

Omolemo: Ya. Over here, there's some birds, butterflies, bees, and they're singing. This one is singing, and this one, and that one. And there's some flowers.

Researcher: What do you find interesting about these pages?

Omolemo: About these birds, they're colourful and the flowers. And they're singing. (Am & Omo/ R1/2/44-51)

In addition, learners rarely engaged with the peritextual features of the picturebook during their first and second reading; they also showed little interest in the vocabulary, typography and punctuation during these readings. During the read-aloud and group discussion, learners also tended to point and name objects and actions that were immediately visible and rarely extended past what was explicitly mentioned. Through multiple engagements with the picturebooks, the learners' engagement deepened in complexity.

Their painted responses revealed that they paid close attention to nature as a setting and thematic element of the picturebook. Figure 4 and Figure 5 show the painted responses of two learners as an example.

During their individual interviews, the learners' reflections about their paintings confirmed their awareness of nature as a central thematic element in the picturebook. Their developed creative responses are encapsulated by the examples of the learners' paintings that indicate interpretive

reimaginings of aspects inspired by the picturebook. One learner had the following to say about their painting:

'... what I drew was the trees because like they were beautiful to me.' (Gr/I/1/3)

Learners also reflected that they had an ongoing positive engagement with the picturebook after the reading.

## Facilitation by researcher and the interaction with peers improved clarity and depth of engagement

The clarity and depth of the learners' engagement depended on the presence of the facilitator as well as the presence of their peers. For basic comprehension of the text, learners sometimes required support in reading the words during initial reading. Initially, learners often required prompting from the researcher to share their views, as well as to go beyond simply narrating the story and pointing out details. Typically, without the use of repeated prompts to share their views, learners had a mostly superficial verbal engagement, and this made my role as a facilitator crucial in their engagement. The following guided questioning was used to draw learners' attention to the theme of sharing that was prominent in the story:

Amu: Here's a lady wearing a purple dress and there's a child that's wearing a tutu.

Omolemo: And here a man is putting his clothes and flowers are around, the birds are on the clothes and a man is standing here and a little girl wearing a tutu.

Amu: Maybe they're twins. Maybe these two are twins.

Omolemo: (shrugs) ... and here are some flowers.

Researcher: And what else do you notice?

Amu: There's a man reaching for a butterfly.

Omolemo: ... and this man is look at the bird.

Researcher: Where's Joe?

Amu: ... here

Researcher: What is he doing?

Amu: Giving the plant to the other girl. (Am & Omo/R1/5-6/142-153)



FIGURE 4: Grace's painted response.



FIGURE 5: Siphwiwe's painted response.



The data further revealed that during paired readings the learners tended to discuss and agree upon interpretations of the words and the images when asked by the researcher. In addition to this, their paired engagement showed that they influenced each other's reading behaviour and engagement. Paired readers would either have similarly enthusiastic engagement or similarly unenthusiastic reading engagement. Essentially, the dialogic engagement between the learners that was facilitated by the researcher during their paired readings added depth to their interpretation of the picturebook. During the read-aloud and group discussion, learners interacted effectively as a group and tended to engage more deeply based on the feedback received from their peers. This is shown by the following exchange between learners:

Omolemo: Ma'am please go back to that page where ... that side it was colourful, and that other side it wasn't colourful

Amu: ... but it's the same guy, the same hairstyle, the same clothes. Maybe the artist did just paint them black now and coloured them

Researcher: Why was this page [13th page opening] colourful and this page [2nd page opening] not colourful?

Clive: ... because they became happy

Omolemo: The people were first sad then they got happy. (GD/6/273-279)

The social setting of this reading activity enhanced the various ways that the learners engaged with the picturebook. Their conversational turns increased during their repeated engagement with the picturebook, as well as during the group discussion setting.

### Learners' initial basic descriptions were complemented by a nuanced appreciation of the aesthetic features of the picturebook

The last main finding focuses on the learners' appreciation of the aesthetic features of the picturebook. The engagement by learners was characterised initially by focusing predominantly on the art in the picturebook. Their comments centred around pointing and naming the art as seen when Siphwe and Clive discussed an illustration:

Siphwe: Oh! He was looking for a seed in an apple. Woah! This apple looks rotten.

Clive: It looks like a monster. (Cl & Si/R1/5/179-180)

Learners attended to the visual element of colour and noticed it initially, even though this was on a basic level. This would develop as they engaged further with the book as seen when they expressed what the use of colour signified. Images with little written text prompted lengthier pointing and naming of the details that they saw as an attempt to piece together the narrative.

During the read-aloud and group discussion, it became evident that the learners were beginning to deepen their understanding of the visual elements, and they started to demonstrate an inferential analysis of *stylistic* features.

When describing an image and making an observation about the emotional effects of colour, Clive said:

'... look at that person, he's grey because he's not happy.' (Cl/GD/3/105-106)

The data showed that the learners were also beginning to speculate on the design process during their group discussion, as shown through the following comments:

'... they used some magazine.' (Si/GD/8/347)

'I think the flower was grey and then she painted it with water colour.' (Omo/GD/8/357)

With repeated engagement, the learners were able to demonstrate a more nuanced appreciation of the aesthetic features of the picturebook as revealed through their painted responses. Most of the learners mimicked the artistic technique of the splattering style used in the picturebook as seen in the painted responses of Amu and Ompha (Figure 6 and Figure 7).

During their reflections on their paintings, the children explained why they included this technique in their paintings, as well as how they did it.



FIGURE 6: Amu's painted response.



FIGURE 7: Ompha's painted response.



Making an intentional choice, Amu said:

'I also splashed some paint here to make it look more colourful.'  
(Am/I/1/5)

To achieve this aesthetic style in her painting, Ompha said:

'I used my finger and paint.' (Omp/I/2/27)

These instances signalled a deep appreciation of this aesthetic feature.

This was further confirmed through their reflections about painting as a response when their responses reflected positive emotions. Cole, for example, expressed that it was his first time painting such images when he said:

'... because I thought maybe that it's going to be like different from the other pictures that I have painted before.' (Co/I/1/14–15)

When asked why he feels happy about his painting, he expressed:

'I can do some paintings that are different.' (Co/I/3/63)

Amu stated that she enjoyed the painting engagement and said:

'... because I thought of being creative.' (Am/I/2/59)

The data shows that not only did they enjoy the act of painting a response, but they also enjoyed incorporating the key aesthetic features from the picturebook into their paintings.

## Discussion

The data revealed the three overarching findings: firstly, that the initially superficial verbal engagement with the picturebook was complemented by more nuanced, inferential and creative responses on further readings. Secondly, facilitation by the researcher and the interaction with peers improved clarity and depth of engagement. Lastly, the learners' initial basic description of what was visible was complemented by a more nuanced appreciation of the aesthetic features of the picturebook. This section will discuss these findings as they relate to existing knowledge on children's engagement with picturebooks.

The reading behaviour of the learners during their first readings indicated that they were accustomed to prioritising the written text over the image. It is possible that this is a result of how they have been taught to engage with books. Learners were 'driven by the narrative thrust' (Doonan 1993:58) and would at times want to rush on to the next page opening. However, through careful observation, and some prompting, they learned that the pictorial text invited a slower interaction requiring them to 'stay, look, search, [and] reflect' (Doonan 1993:58). At first, learners tended to mostly point at and name the objects and actions of characters.

The initially superficial responses were complemented by more nuanced, inferential and creative responses upon re-readings. The learners' verbal engagement during subsequent readings revealed that they benefitted from the re-reading of

the picturebook as they were able to subsequently offer more insightful responses. Pantaleo (2017) explains that repeated readings of text can enhance learners' comprehension. Some learners expressed the desire to read the story again, which signalled an enjoyment of the picturebook in addition to an opportunity for an enriched engagement with the book.

The focus group discussion also revealed that the learners began to notice more detail in the images. Illustrations are, of course, key semiotic resources that learners use to make meaning in picturebooks (Serafini & Reid 2022), and this improved on re-readings. The learners in my study demonstrated how they used the illustrations as a semiotic resource throughout their engagement and how they interrogated images to a greater extent the more they looked at them. Learners benefited from a 'slow [and repeated] looking' (Pantaleo 2019:1) as they noticed the intricate details in the images on further readings, a finding that resonates with what Pantaleo (2017) found in her study. In both her study and mine, learners were able to glean more from the picturebook as a result of multiple engagements.

The invitation to engage with the picturebook through their own paintings led to a variety of creative responses from the learners. The painting occurred immediately after the read-aloud and group discussion, and can thus be considered a direct response to their multiple readings of the book. The learners were free to use any art medium, but they all chose to use acrylic paint in their painted responses. The individual interviews provided insight into their paintings and revealed that some learners produced interpretive reimaginations of aspects of the picturebook. Similar to what Kendrick and McKay (2009:54) found, children were 'able to express powerful and imaginative ideas and problems ... through visual modes', thus drawing attention to the importance of visual responses as a way of engaging with literature.

Sara also explained:

'I feel that I'm here everywhere and outside playing with my family, that's what I feel.' (Sa/I/3/62-63)

When asked what she feels when she looks at her painting. A creative response such as this aligns with the ideas of reader response where there is a unique text created from the transaction between the text and the individual reader, which can be described as a form of 'co-authorship' (Pantaleo 2004:9). From this, we can see that on subsequent engagements, especially those that moved from talking to painting, their engagement became more nuanced and thoughtful. In addition, these imagined responses show that the learners were in fact cognitively engaged even when painting. Murris and Thompson (2016:2–3) remind us, of course, that 'the imagination is part of the cognitive process'. This is similar to what Arizpe and Styles (2002) found in their study with young readers who responded to a picturebook through a drawing. Learners' engagement with the broad themes of the book, which are childhood, community and nature, as revealed during the read-aloud and group discussion, showed a deeper, more engaged reading of the picturebook than was evident in

their initial reading. Understanding these thematic elements demonstrated the children's literary competence (Sipe 2008a) as well as the picturebook's pedagogical potential.

The researcher played an indispensable role as a facilitator, and the study found that peer engagement during the paired reading and group discussions was also a key part of promoting learner's engagement. The balance of being a 'guide on the side' and not a 'sage on the stage' (King 1993:30) was key in getting the learners to participate in discussions on the picturebook that moved past simply describing the images (Doonan 1993). This confirms Sipe's (2008b) assertion that the role that teachers play during learners' engagement with picturebooks is an essential component of deeper engagement.

Questioning was a crucial element in the way the learners responded to and engaged with the picturebook, much like what Arizpe and Styles (2002) found in their study. Similarly, it was necessary for me to use my questions effectively to move the learners from a superficial engagement to a more in-depth and meaningful engagement. This type of guided questioning increased the learners' ability to engage with the peritext in the book. True to what Lambert (2015) describes in her book, the potential that the peritextual features have to enhance meaning is intimately connected with the adult facilitator's ability to devote time to engaging with them during the reading. Frequent prompting and a clear intention to get the learners to recognise the 'semiotic significance of colour' (Sipe 2008a:124) throughout the whole book was key.

The interaction between the words and the images in picturebooks creates readerly gaps. As discussed in the literature review, the readerly gaps in picturebooks function to 'spur ... the reader into action' (Beauvais 2015:2), demanding that they pay closer attention to what is in the gap. The data confirms the understanding of reader response theory, which explains that learners 'bring their own experience of life to bear upon what they read or see' (Van Renen 2008:9). This was evidenced when one learner used her prior knowledge to interpret the actions of the main character, and thus the overall story, in a unique way.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory is fundamental in understanding and explaining what occurred among learners as they engaged with the picturebook. Pantaleo (2019:3) asserts that 'in classrooms, reading, writing, viewing, artistic expression and consumption, and multimodal designing are social practices' (Pantaleo 2019:3). Much of children's engagement was shaped by the interactions in the social setting with their peers and the researcher adding depth to their responses.

The final theme of this study centres on the learners' appreciation of the aesthetic features of the picturebook. The learners began to understand the picturebook as a multimodal text, displaying an increasing interest in the *visual* elements, as they engaged with the book multiple

times. The observations discussed in this section can be seen to be the beginning of visual literacy skills, similar to what Arizpe and Styles (2002), and Braid and Finch (2015) discovered through their work with young children and picturebooks. The learners in my study displayed an appreciation of the aesthetic appearance of the illustrations, while using basic visual literacy skills, such as considering the use of colour and identifying smaller details to *analyse* – and not just observe – the picturebook.

The learners' comments towards the latter part of the study shifted and demonstrated more insight and appreciation of the *aesthetic* appeal of the images. They were drawn to the pages with vibrant colours and detailed images as they all expressed that the gatefold at the end of the picturebook was their favourite page opening. What this indicated was that they easily focused on the striking images in the picturebook. Frey and Fisher (2008:14) state that '[a] big part of the impact of images is the color' and this influences the impression that the viewer has. In *The Extraordinary Gardener* (Boughton 2018), the use of colour is deliberately central to the narrative, and so it is fitting that the learners frequently commented on this.

The artistic techniques used in *The Extraordinary Gardener* (Boughton 2018) were foregrounded during the learners' discussions of their own paintings. The author-illustrator's technique of splatters was vaguely mentioned by only a few of the learners during the readings. It took the learners creating their own paintings for me to recognise the impact that the artistic technique of splatters and the use of colour would have on the learners' appreciation of the picturebook. Their engagement with the visual aspects of the picturebook demonstrates a budding visual literacy as they were able to make meaning of what was presented visually on the page. Their developing visual literacy skills were deepened through multiple re-readings and with their painted responses. This allowed the learners to go from basic decoding of images to emotional responses and confident appraisals of aesthetic elements, as well as enhanced literary understanding. In other words, they went from describing what they could see, to reflecting on what artistic techniques were used to present that idea in a particular way, and then mimicking it without me prompting them to do so. Certainly, this study revealed that 'children [*in Grade 3*] are learning to read pictures as surely as they are learning to read words' (Lambert 2015:80).

## Strengths and limitations

A limitation of this study was that because I only worked with a small group of 11 learners, the main findings of this study are not generalisable. I also recognise that the South African schooling context does not mirror the context of this study. Having worked with only 11 learners, I was able to be more engaged with them and allowed each learner the time and the space to share their thoughts modelling a small group pedagogical approach to using picturebooks. Most

teachers may not be able to do this. Therefore, more in-depth studies with a larger cohort of learners may generate more generalisable findings for the field of picturebook studies in South African classrooms. Another limitation is that I only worked with one picturebook, *The Extraordinary Gardener* (Boughton 2018), which I had selected for engagement. While it is common for studies on how children engage with picturebooks to make use of multiple picturebooks, this design choice would not have aligned with the overall case study design of this research.

## Conclusion

This study sought to investigate how children in Grade 3 engage with a contemporary picturebook, *The Extraordinary Gardener* (Boughton 2018). Using a qualitative case study, as well as other qualitative methods to gather data, I was able to deepen my understanding of what is possible when learners engage with a picturebook in this way. The results also gave me deep insight into how contemporary picturebooks can be brought into classrooms through small group activities to maximise the much-needed reading comprehension of foundation phase learners.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.N.P., upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author, and the publisher.

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