Imaginative Reading

Reading as an Imaginative Act

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Abstract: The teaching of reading provokes heated discussion, particularly when the reputations of governments and institutions rest on what students do and achieve. This paper focuses on the first two years of a three year project where the researchers worked in communities of practice with secondary school English teachers in state, Catholic and independent schools in Victoria, Australia with a focus on examining and improving the teaching of reading. A starting point for practitioner inquiries was giving close attention to what students say about their reading experiences. Based on the students' insight and a return to key theorists, we suggest that the process of reading in English is largely an imaginative act. Like the students, we argue for curriculum that is less 'fenced in' by limited notions of quality and more open to genuine learning.

Introduction

Debates about the teaching of reading often focus on declining scores in high stakes tests. Concerns about students' achievement levels led to a national inquiry into the teaching of literacy, and particularly reading, over 10 years ago in Australia (Rowe, 2005). In alarmist tones the author argued that educational 'fences' needed to be built at the top of the 'cliff' rather than provide 'belated and costly "ambulance services" at the bottom' (p. 9). Assuming that the fences are to prevent young people from toppling tragically over the edge, it is implied that as a nation we are on the brink of a skills-based disaster and that teachers are largely to blame. This view was recently reinforced by Senator Birmingham who suggested that NAPLAN data released in 2016 indicated that schools were not meeting the 'high standards we should expect with the growth in investment we have had in our schools' (http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016–12-13/stalling-naplan-results-spark-calls-to-crack-the-whip-in-school/8113518). A growing emphasis on testing basic skills and rigid accountability systems, are worryingly impacting on students' experience of reading in the classroom (Manuel, 2012b). When research studies show that there is a strong link between interest in reading and achievement in reading (Meiers, 2004) it is clear that students' experiences must be given close attention.

This inquiry focuses on the voices of secondary school students. Over a two-year period and with the support of English teachers, we interviewed close to 100 Victorian secondary school students in 10 secondary schools and also invited students to draw reading in an attempt to better understand the nature of reading, particularly as it is experienced in the school context. During the two years we worked as critical friends with teachers involved in a state government funded project where teams of secondary school English teachers worked in communities of practice to examine and improve the teaching of reading. The inquiry was led and supported by the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE), a state-based subject association for English teachers. This paper aims to shift attention away from policy makers, governments and the media who focus on broadcasting deficit views of young people and engaging in blame games largely aimed at teachers, to an authentic focus on those who are asked to read in classrooms: the students. From them we seek insight into the process of reading, what helps students to develop as readers, and the impact of classroom learning experiences. While the interviews focused generally on experiences of reading in English classrooms, it is clear in many of the students' comments that they are thinking about experiences with literary

texts, although this cannot always be assumed. What emerges from the interviews is a conception of reading as a dynamic, multi-faceted, cultural experience reliant on the making of imaginative connections provoked by visual, dialogic, emotional, embodied, metacognitive and social stimuli. Based on these understandings we examine the implications for English teaching and suggest that a continuing focus on technical, formulaic approaches that are disconnected from the experiences and lives of young people and that treat reading as a routine, procedural practice rather than an imaginative one, are negatively impacting on young people's desire to read for meaning. We suggest that a system focused on providing paramedic assistance to isolated problems rather than a focus on the person-centred nature of learning in classrooms (Fielding, 2001), is doing more harm than good. We concur with Gee (2017, in press) who suggests that language and experience bootstrap each other (p. 20) and that 'a dance between immersion and instruction' (p. 25) can lead more meaningfully to the enhancement of reading in classrooms.

Attending to the voices of students

In foregrounding the voices of students in schools, we aim to 'give voice to a people's experience' (Featherstone, 1989, p. 376) and to argue, in refreshing, authentic ways, that the person-centred nature of schooling (Fielding, 2006) demands that we take students' experiences seriously. The lived experiences of young people are often discounted in an 'impersonal ethos of competition and performativity' (Angus, 2006, p. 369), unless they are used as a managerial tool for school leaders in self evaluations (Duffield, Allan, Turner & Morris, 2000). Listening closely to students' voices demands a capacity to empathise and a willingness to hear perspectives that may not sit easily with dominant views (Smyth, 2012). It is argued here and elsewhere (McCallum, Hargreaves & Gipps, 2000) that student voice is an increasingly important element in understanding the nature of teaching and learning at school.

If we agree that attending to students' voices is important, then we need to take seriously what they say, do and refuse to take part in. More generally, students can powerfully decide not to learn. Kohol (1994) suggested that purposefully deciding not to learn 'involves closing off part of oneself and limiting one's experience. It can require actively refusing to pay attention, acting dumb, scrambling one's thoughts and overriding curiosity' (p. 4). This should not be confused, Kohol (1994) argues, with failing and in fact refusing to take part is an important aspect of executing free will and choice and enables people to shape life directions and identity (p. 10). Kohl (1994, p. 11) suggests that authorities are stuck on a view that there is a single way to live and learn and that we are driven as teachers and policy makers, by what we think matters. More reductive views of knowledge, it is suggested, not only limit the agency of young people and ignore the subjectivities, lives, cultures and histories of learners (Yandell, 2013), but can lead to young people quietly or more boisterously (McGraw, 2011) refusing to take part. In the face of increasing pressure to improve results in high stakes tests, students can be exposed to uninspiring pedagogies and then made responsible for their failure (Bickerstaff, 2011; Clandinin, Steeves & Caine, 2013). Communities of practice shaped by reciprocal engagement in dialogue and mutual respect for what people experience are necessary ingredients for 'a lived and living commitment to education' (Fielding, 2001, p. 108).

What counts as reading?

Yandell (2012) argues that what increasingly counts as reading in English classrooms, influenced by more reductive, technical-rationalist views is, 'knowledge of the word, but not of the world' (p. 284). There is also a renewed assumption, Yandell (2012) suggests, that meaning is in the text and that the reader must simply understand it and respond. The idea that reading is a 'human experience' (Rosenblatt, 1938) and an 'imaginative encounter' (Dixon, 1979) signifies a more complex process that is at once personal and cultural, creative and logical, emotional and critical; something open to possibility and difficult to capture and measure. While reading texts in the English classroom invariably deals with examining the experiences of human beings in diverse contexts, times and situations, the sense we make and remake of texts as readers based on our own assumptions and life experiences, is also a fundamentally human experience. Rosenblatt (1938) suggests that the literary text 'exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text' (p. 24). Reading is a complex process, she suggests, emerging from the connections readers make, based on their personal histories. Reading is a transactional process of making meaning: a unique 'imaginative experience' (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 24) that is dynamically constructed and selective.

Also some time ago, Dixon (1979) wrote about reading literature and media texts as imaginative encounters with the stories people tell (p. 29). Interested in what happens in students' heads when they read, Dixon described a dynamic experience of being inside the text and finding language to *contemplate* it. Reading, in this sense, is being 'carried away' and also, in significant moments, 'turning away'. Being absorbed in the world of the text, in a world of imagination and feelings is what Rosenblatt (1978) refers to as an aesthetic stance. This isn't simply getting lost in a text, but includes 'a continuing awareness of the text' (p. 29) and how it functions, as well as a reflexive awareness of the reader's own shaping of meaning and what the 'words are stirring up' (p. 31). Rosenblatt (1978) suggests that any reading stance whether it be aesthetic or scientific, requires imagination (p. 32). Isn't any reader, Rosenblatt asks, required to 'conjure up the referents for the verbal symbols and to entertain new ideas?' (p. 32). The process of putting together verbal clues involves a complex interplay and synthesis of images, thoughts, voices, questions, emotions; what Rosenblatt (1978) would also suggest is a creative process (p. 52). The reader draws upon her/his internalised cultural understandings in a dynamic, often unconscious manner which implies that the broader and deeper a reader's relevant cultural store is, the richer the connections can be. Memory, Rosenblatt (1978) suggests, also serves an important function, not only in the sense of bringing life memories to the text. Recognition and memory of linguistic features during the reading process, allow readers to make complex links and juxtapositions that enable symbols, themes, ideas to be evoked and considered. The 'tentative creation of a framework' (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 62) of understanding, which is confirmed and challenged during the reading process is a subtle and uncertain process which demands attention to detail, confidence and trust. Being able to express and continue to extend and shape interpretations with others also involves an imaginative interplay of language and experience.

Iser (1972) suggests that in 'climbing aboard' a text, the reader sets it in motion (p. 282). Literary texts do not develop in a 'rigid' clear way; Iser argues, that they activate creative activity. In the process of gap filling, dynamism is created; a 'virtual dimension' that is neither the text nor the reader's imagination. It is the coming together of both (p. 284). In our urge to make meaning and see patterns and cohesion we actively group things together and create visual pictures and mental maps. We also envisage future directions and formulate expectations. Iser (1972) suggests that the process of forming allusions is never completely satisfying or complete; we oscillate 'between consistency and 'alien associations', between involvement in and observation of the illusion' (p. 291). It is this process that creates wonder, curiosity and intrigue. As readers we engage in an ongoing generative process of considering possibilities, shifting perspectives, finding significance.

Recently, Gee (2017, in press) argued that thinking and understanding is developed when we 'use mentally stored data from experience to run simulations in our mind' (p. 3). Our mental representations 'meld images, sounds, feelings, words, and other human sensory information' (p. 3). These representations are flexible and can take on different perspectives. Our humanity, suggests Gee (2017, in press), is linked to our capacity to 'see' ourselves and others acting in the world in certain ways. These mental scenarios, he contends, are multimodal and involve every human sensation, much like a video game. Our ability to situate meaning is the core basis of learning (Gee 2017, in press, p. 17); language and experience he suggests, bootstrap each other (p. 20). While Gee is not writing explicitly about the process of reading, his theory of learning is relevant (2017, in press). He suggests that learners must know how to situate meaning in any new domain and that this requires experiences in specific contexts. When reading is an imaginative, dynamic process it has the potential to fuel learning through meaningful engagement in contexts that evolve in the mind and through the developing use of language to explain, examine and recreate those contexts. The role of the teacher as curriculum designer and pedagogue, Gee (2017, in press) argues, is paramount. The student learns through immersion in experiences they care about *and* through thoughtfully considered instruction and talk that helps learners to 'recruit language as a system to label, guide and organise their experiences' (2017, in press, p. 26). When we test or assess students who lack situated meanings, he argues, we treat them unfairly.

Communities of practice: practitioner inquiries into reading

This paper is based on a three-year project funded by the Victorian State Government and led by the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) which aims to examine and improve the teaching of reading. The paper is based on themes emerging

from the first two years of the project. On behalf of VATE, the authors of this paper, as English educators and researchers, framed the project as a joint inquiry involving students, teachers and ourselves. Our role is to act as critical friends rather than instructional experts. In the first year of the project four teams of English teachers from four secondary schools took part and in the second year six teams of English teachers from six schools were involved. The schools include rural, regional and metropolitan schools and state, Catholic and independent schools. Each team includes between three to six teachers who teach English at junior, middle and senior levels. As critical friends we work with the teacher teams over the course of a year in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) focused on building shared knowledge through active inquiries into the teaching of reading. Once the teachers find a focus for their inquiry; they trial new approaches in their classrooms and meet together regularly to discuss actions, students' responses and personal discoveries. At the end of the year, teacher teams present their practitioner inquiries at the annual VATE state conference.

Each year the teams initiate their inquiries by examining the thoughts and experiences of students with the aim of pinpointing a focus for their inquiry based on a theme that emerges from the students' experiences. Permission was sought from students, parents and principals to invite selected students to participate in focus group discussions about their reading experiences. The students were selected by their teachers to ensure that a range of students with different abilities and attitudes were involved in the discussions. The interviews were open-ended, extended discussions based on prompt questions related to students' background experiences with reading, their personal reading interests, their feelings about reading, and their approaches to reading. A key question posed during the discussions was: *What happens in your head when you read?* All interviews conducted for the purposes of this study were conducted by the researchers who were also the critical friends. During the discussions, field notes were taken by researchers which included comments made by students. The researchers took care to capture the students' exact wording; however, such a process involves a degree of selection and interpretation that cannot be avoided. Clearly, not everything that was said was recorded; however, the researchers attempted to honour the students' voices through close listening, attentiveness, empathy and curiosity. In this sense the interviewers worked intuitively, drawing upon their interest in reading and their interest in students' experience, to record what was 'interesting and important' (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 11) to young people and to English educators. Field notes of this kind are inscriptions and 'such inscriptions inevitably reduce the welter and confusion of the social world to written words that can be reviewed, studied and thought about time and time again' (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 8). Students' names were not recorded by the interviewers. The field notes comprise direct statements made by students as well as general observations related to the number of people in agreement, the level of ease students seemed to have when responding, and the manner in which the conversation seemed to build. This research project was approved by a university ethics committee and by the Victorian Department of Education.

Either during the interviews or in a whole class activity, students were also invited to 'draw' reading. It was explained to students that drawing can be an interesting way to capture authentic experiences. Drawings can depict general experiences, emotions and actions directly or metaphorically. Students were asked not to worry about their drawing skills and to capture their initial response in any way they felt comfortable. They could use stick figures for example and simple images or diagrams. Once the teachers saw how revealing the drawings were, many decided to run this activity in their English classrooms as an opportunity to further get to know their students as readers and as a way to gather feedback about students' perceptions of classroom reading activities.

In the following section, we present clusters of student statements and drawings related to key themes that emerged across the schools. The key themes are captured in a student quote written in bold text. We follow this section with a discussion related to the notion of reading as an imaginative act and begin to examine the implications for teaching. By including the student statements in a thematic cluster related to their reading experiences, we aim to capture diverse perspectives and pay respect to students' experience and insight. It is worth noting that in each school there was a small group of interviewees who had such negative experiences of reading that they avoided discussions about the process. These students could not explore the questions in any depth and were stuck in a view of reading as decoding rather than comprehending. While students' and schools' names are not identified in the paper, we include the year level of

students in order to provide contextual information. In Australia, students begin secondary school in Year 7 when they are 11 or 12 years of age. They complete secondary school in Year 12.

Students' statements and drawings

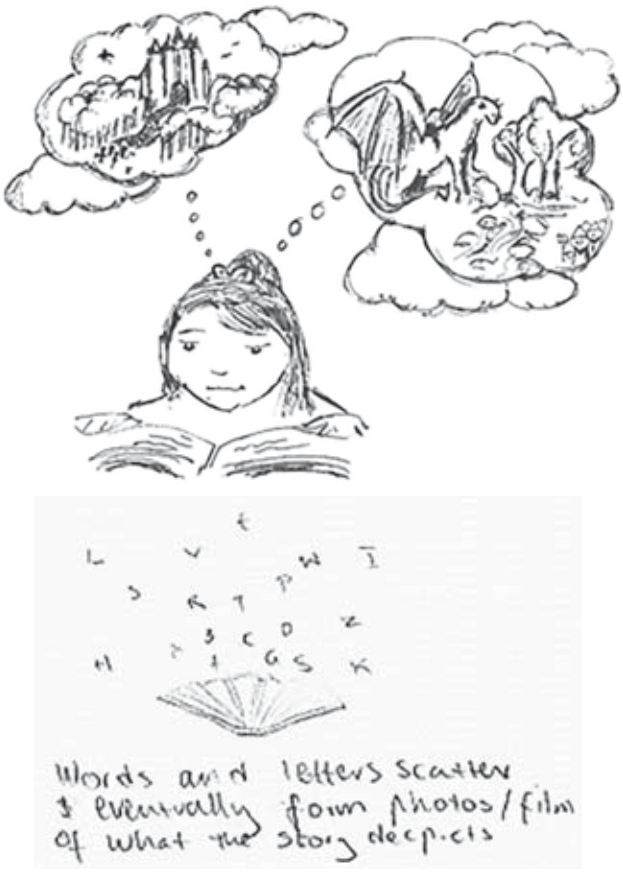
'We don't ever talk about what happens when you read, we just talk about the book.' (Year 7)

The vast majority of students interviewed agreed that the focus of learning in relation to reading in English is on the text rather than on their reading processes. Most students said that they had never been asked to talk about what happens in their heads when they read and that they had never thought about it explicitly. Without a metalanguage to discuss reading and a conscious metacognitive awareness of what they do as readers, they found it difficult to voice their experiences; however, it was noted that as they warmed into the discussion with their peers, one person prompted another's thinking and by comparing experiences, they came to understand their own. For many students discussing the nature of reading and one's own experiences in an open, non-threatening way with others, was an intriguing and revealing experience.

> 'I haven't talked about reading in these ways. It would help so that you could consciously do some of these things if you're not. At least it raises your awareness.' (Year 11)
>
> 'You're noticing what you're doing when you read, but you're not taking note.' (Year 10)
>
> 'I don't know what happens, you just do it.' (Year 11)
>
> 'I don't think about it much, whether I'm good at it or not. It doesn't matter. I just read. It's something I do on my own.' (Year 9)
>
> 'We don't talk about reading in English because we have other stuff to do. We have exams and we have to stay on that course.' (Year 8)
>
> 'It's so weird, I just don't think about it. We never talk about it – and it's really hard to find the words.' (Year 8)

'When you're into it, you're focused and you visualise it.' (Year 9)

A common way to capture visualisation in the drawings was in thought bubbles or in dream-like clouds floating above the head. Another key theme in the drawings was the lifting of words from the page to suggest that though reading, words are transformed by the reader into visual depictions. For the great majority



of students, the process of reading activates visual images in their minds; however, it was interesting to hear that the nature of the images can be different for different readers. Some students see moving images in sequence rather like a film; others see a series of still snapshots. Some intentionally generate the images while for others they emerge naturally. The reader's stance can also be different: some students participate in the narrative while others watch as an observer. While the reader's stance may change depending on the construction of the text; it is interesting to note that students often generalise their stance and suggest that they have a dominant way of perceiving what happens.

> 'I see different still images, that's what's happening in my head.' (Year 8)
>
> 'When I think about it, I'm on the set of a movie and it's like being the director.' (Year 8)
>
> 'I love reading. I'm obsessed with fictional worlds. I imagine what I'm reading. I picture it in my head. I see how it plays out. To really get into it, you have to see pictures. If I'm trying to get into a book, I make myself picture something.' (Year 10)
>
> 'It's important to see things at the beginning. It's like a stage that you add to over time.' (Year 10)
>
> 'I make it real in my head. When they speak, it's like I'm looking at them, not being them.' (Year 10)

'I try to relate the characters to people I know. I picture people I know.' (Year 9)

'I don't relate the characters to anyone I know. I just use the descriptions from the book to make them.' (Year 9)

'I couldn't draw a picture of what I see in my head. The pictures are real faint at the start and then become more detailed as you go along.' (Year 9)

'I start by picturing myself and then as I get more interested, the pictures become more developed.' (Year 9)

'If you don't see the pictures, you don't understand.' (Year 7)

'The pictures are still and silent.' (Year 9)

'I picture the words on a background. I visualise the words.' (Year 9)

'I try to picture what's going on. I'm not a reader so it's harder to picture things. I can get in the flow and then I get distracted and I muck up then I have to go back and it upsets the flow.' (Year 10)

'If you were always aware of visualising, it would be tiring.' (Year 9)

'I talk about it in my head to myself.' (Year 8)

Students were less aware of hearing voices when they read than seeing pictures, although once the notion of hearing internalised voices was raised either by the interviewer or a fellow student, students agreed that voices and internal dialogic interactions were an integral part of the process of sense-making. Once again, students' experiences were diverse and the presence of 'voice' is not always apparent. Some students heard expressive voices; for others the voice was monotone. Some voices were interactions between characters and more authoritative narrative voices. Other students heard their own voices interjecting and sometimes, particularly when reading for school purposes, a personal voice labelled the process as boring or difficult

or irrelevant. For some internal dialogue enabled puzzling, reflection, decision-making and important connections to be made. A small number of students (as in the first drawing above) recognised the use of voice as a means of consciously calling upon reading strategies learned at school. For most, however the notion of voice was linked intuitively to engagement and immersion in the text (as suggested in the second drawing). Some older students, although not many, linked a critical voice to deeper levels of analysis and the questioning of views and values in texts. In some schools the notion of voice was not raised at all.

'You say things in your head, even when their voice is different. All the words I repeat in my head, but it's different for different characters. There are different voices for different characters.' (Year 11)

'No, why would you do that? You hear your personal voice when you're not into a book. When you're into a book you're removed from yourself.' (Year 11)

'I hear noises like background sounds. I don't hear the voices of characters. I say the words in my head.' (Year 9)

'When I question a book I like it because it means I'm invested in it. It makes me want to read more.' (Year 9)

'I hear the story. I hear the words. I hear the character's voices.' (Year 8)

'You can use voices to make different characters real. I'm aware of my own voice mixing with other voices. When you put yourself in the story and you use your own voice, you get more out of it.' (Year 9)

'It feels like a narrated movie. There are conversations happening in my head – first my voice, then their voices. You have a discussion with yourself about what's happening.' (Year 10)

'You've got to be a good reader in your head before you can read publicly.' (Year 10)

'We talk to ourselves more when it's hard.' (Year 7)

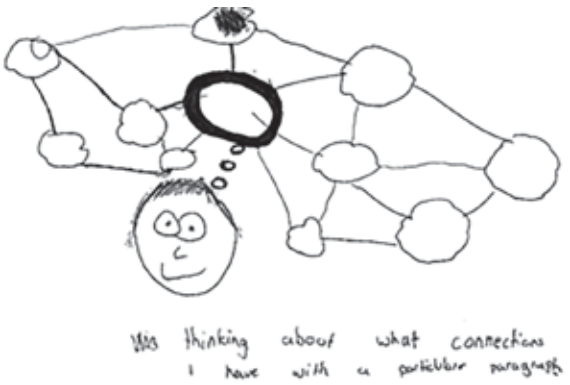
'I say to myself, try hard.' (Year 7)

'I take things from the character's point of view. I take a position. If you don't like the character, you're less likely to believe them. I think about my opinions, if I'd do the same thing etc. I'm aware of my thoughts. I put the book down and think about it and ask questions of the text. That's when you start to formulate opinions. It happens naturally. Your thoughts pop up as questions. It happens without deliberate attention.' (Year 11)

'When I read I talk to myself about being dumb not getting into it; something's wrong with me.' (Year 9)

'When I'm enjoying reading, I'm thinking about what could happen next. I think about why they're going through that and why they're doing things.' (Year 7)

Many students, particularly those who are engage regularly with reading, believe the process of reading involves actively making connections and reconnections between what has been read and what may occur next and building a complex mental maps over time (as depicted in the selected drawings). The reader is engaged in a complex, non-linear process of going along with things in good faith and then standing away to reflect, connect and question. Wonder, as depicted in many of the drawings, is central to thinking deeply about the text and means that when connections are made, the reader feels personal satisfaction and joy. The process of meaningful analysis is reliant on being interested in the text; intrigue occurs when personal connections are made and the reader wants to know more. Experienced readers know that being confused as a reader is not something to fear; in fact they enjoy the challenge of having to work hard to solve puzzles over time. Students who described an experience of intrigue and wonder were more likely to talk about this in relation to texts they read independently outside of school.



'When I'm enjoying reading, I'm thinking about what could happen next. I think about why they're going through that and why they're doing things.' (Year 7)

'Some books are complicated and you have to read over things a few times to understand. I like it when it's complicated. It's like solving a puzzle, like on TV when you have a detective trying to figure it out.' (Year 7)

'I'm a logical person. I figure out pathways. I'm always guessing. One of the best parts of reading is the guessing.' (Year 10)

'I like being confused and then I keep reading and then BREAKTHROUGH!!' (Year 10)

'When you're engaged you understand and wonder. When you're not engaged your mind wanders. This happens for me most of the time in English.' (Year 8)

'Books I like take a while to get into. I can be confused and trying to work things out but it keeps me thinking and trying to make sense.' (Year 8)

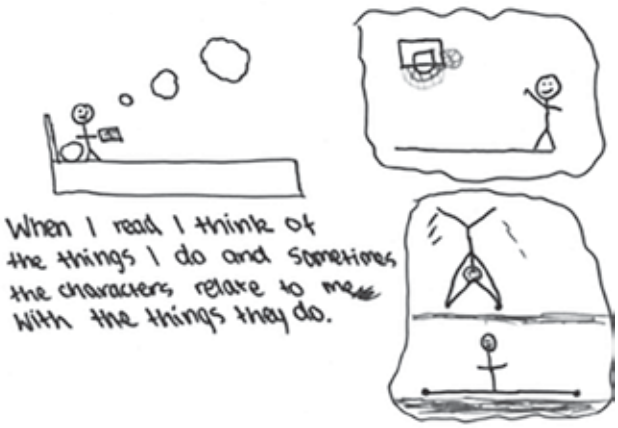
'I like things to be open ended, not literal. It really gets me thinking.' (Year 8)

'You go along with a character even though it doesn't seem right – you suspend disbelief. You don't think about questioning until later. In the beginning you're empathising.' (Year 11)

'I can really get lost in a book. And I find myself. I relate and I find out about myself. (Year 7)

The students, on the whole, believe that the process of reading is highly personalised and emotional. They enjoy the intimacy they have with texts that speak to them in the moment about things that are familiar as well as foreign. They are aware that their interpretations are their own and that through these thinking connections, they learn about themselves, others and the world. Many of the students understood that not all texts incite rich personal connections in all readers. Most students spoke about the importance of choosing their own text and of the difficulty of engaging in texts selected by others. They saw a difference between reading texts at home and reading texts at school.

'In my head I think about what reading is like for me, but I don't talk about this stuff with real people.' (Year 7)



'It's different for everyone. I think it's different because it seems to be different because it's so personal to me. Even reading aloud is different. People say things differently. I think, 'that's not how I would say that!'" (Year 7)

'Reading is intense if you're into the book.' (Year 7)

'If you read it makes a big difference in your life.' (Year 9)

'When you're into a book, you can be overcome with emotion. It can make me very happy.' (Year 8)

'If you're by yourself you get into it more.'

'When you're reading, you're creating who you are. It's unconscious. I identify with characters who are similar to me or who I want to be like. But if you didn't read there are other ways to find out who you are.' (Year 10)

'If you're not into it, you don't think or imagine yourself in it.' (Year 9)

'You've got to be personally interested … then you'll read it, take it in and think about it.' (Year 10)

'There are no rules with reading. Everyone is different.' (Year 10)

'I can't read something I don't like.' (Year 7)

'I don't mind reading, it's relaxing. It calms me down if I get angry. It makes me calm. It takes me somewhere else.' (Year 7)

'If you're doing it in the classroom no one really cares because it's work. You feel like you're judged for your opinion. You feel odd. It feels like there's only one answer. You feel like you're alone in your opinion.' (Year 8)

Many students spoke about the disconnections they experience when reading texts in English. They spoke about the process of reading at school being 'boring' and while students had the ability to decode texts, the process for many was mind-numbing and formulaic rather than dynamic. They spoke about reading as 'work'; a less personal and more limiting experience than reading independently and choosing one's own texts. Some students felt disempowered during reading activities because the texts are selected by teachers and the ideas about texts seem to be already formulated. Some students suggested that when they are not actively involved in thinking about the text, it is difficult to respond in writing. One boy spoke angrily about being labelled as 'dumb' because he had nothing to say about a text he was not engaged in. There was a strong sense across all schools that students were actively deciding not to read entire texts because they didn't see the texts as worthy.

'It's not hard, it's just boring.' (Year 8)

'Reading in English is not the same as reading at home. There are distractions in class and some don't care.' (Year 8)

'It's not as fun because we can't develop our own point of view. When we do chapter questions it gets annoying. When we read aloud in class the voices aren't right. I have vivid voices in my head and its monotone in class.' (Year 10)

'I haven't liked any of the books I've read in class. If you choose something yourself, it makes all the difference.' (Year 10)

'We don't want to be taught.' (Year 8)

'When a question is asked by a teacher, I always think, why that question?' (Year 8)

'In English you have to write it down and make it neat … make it proper so that it makes sense. When you talk with others it's more exciting. You're exploring and finding out what someone else thinks.' (Year 8)

'If you're not interested, you think about other things. You get distracted. You turn the pages and you don't comprehend a thing.' (Year 11)

'When you have to answer questions students get confused because they don't know what the teacher wants. What the teacher wants dominates. There's always different ways you'd like to tackle things, we always go the teacher's way.' (Year 10)

'The stuff we read at school doesn't relate to me.' (Year 10)

'I felt so dumb in English because I didn't know what to say about the book we were reading because I couldn't connect to it. I couldn't write. I felt stupid. But I know I'm not. That's really frustrating!' (Year 10)

'It's hard when you haven't focused on the book, to write about what you like. You still learn new words but when you're not taking in the book, you don't remember what happened.' (Year 9)

'I get angry when I don't understand. It's too confusing trying to understand stuff.' (Year 7)

Reading as an imaginative act and the implications for teaching

We draw upon Rosenblatt's (1978) notion of reading as 'imaginative experience', Dixon's (1979) idea that reading is an 'imaginative encounter' and Iser's (1972) view that it is the reader's imagination that 'animates' the text to explain what it is the students are telling us about their experience of reading – and why they sometimes disconnect in English classes. We go beyond the idea that reading *builds* imagination to suggesting that the process of reading *is* imagination at work. Reading texts in English involves an imaginative interplay between prior experience and knowledge, internal and external dialogue, visual images, emotions and embodied understandings. It is the readers' imaginative mind which enables deeper levels of meaning-making and imbues the text with personal significance. Questioning the text and one's own reading responses can take place in this dynamic encounter at any time and independent questioning is an important aspect of wondering, critical thinking, developing deep understanding and identity-making. Reading is not an easy experience to capture logically; in different moments the process of constructing personal meaning can involve fluid and disparate moves; it can be open to possibility and be resistant. It is the complicated, creative and empowering nature of the process that we find students are curious to know more about and so we suggest like Meek et al. (198) that 'those secret things' that readers do should become an explicit focus in classrooms.

Reid (1990) reminded us some time ago, that 'reading is shaped by the situation in which it occurs' (p. 49). The situatedness of reading influences our interpretive responses. The reading of texts is influenced by a range of interlinking frames like the way texts are presented through curriculum, talked about by influential others, the way texts interact with other texts, and the way they interact with dominant cultural perspectives. Reid (1990) argued that readers need to be alert to the way these frames contribute to the meanings we make. *Circumtextual* framing, Reid (1990) suggested can include the way official rubrics, curriculum policies, teachers' notes and textbooks influence understandings. Many of the students interviewed were acutely aware that certain pedagogical practices and approaches to curriculum were constraining influences which essentially pacified and dulled the reading experience. Other studies (Manuel, 2012a; Cope, 1997; Thomson, 1987) have also found that too many students do not enjoy the texts selected in English and that forcing students to read and persisting with activities they find boring and repetitive, turns students off reading, and importantly prevents the enhancement of skills and deep understandings. We suggest that the current focus on technical-rationalist approaches to teaching and learning reinforced by an increased focus on high-stakes testing and rigid accountability processes, is leading to a reversion to more teacher-oriented instruction that reinforces limited interpretations of texts and ways of responding. As suggested by others (Parr & Bulfin, 2015; Wyn, Turnball and Grimshaw, 2014; Comber and McCormack, 2011) many teachers feel obliged to

teach to the tests despite feeling uncomfortable about doing so. Brock (2012) passionately argued that 'a child's education must not be screwed up by any rigid imposition of grid references from any particular ideological map.' (p. 45). Teachers of reading, he suggested 'must exorcise themselves from the curse of privileging form over meaning; of relying on the humdrum at the expense of the creative; of confusing the sum of atomised parts with the organic wholeness of experience' (p. 45). If reading is understood as an imaginative act: a dynamic, multi-faceted, cultural experience reliant on the making of imaginative connections provoked by visual, dialogic, emotional, embodied, metacognitive and social stimuli, what difference would it make to teaching?

While we will examine the implications for pedagogy elsewhere, it is clear that when teachers understand reading as an imaginative act, students and their teachers become more engaged in exploring texts in classrooms; the task of the teachers then is to 'bootstrap' (Gee, 2017) the more formal ways in which texts are making meaning to that emotional engagement. Teachers in this project have been inspired by their students to plan more socially-oriented activities that get students actively thinking, interpreting, talking and imagining. One team has focused on reading conferences and examined ways to develop authentic conversations with students about the process of reading. Another team has focused on the notion of voice and is placing an explicit focus on activating dialogic interactions which enhance and value students' interpretations of texts and build internal questioning. Other teams are focusing on creating embodied experiences which enable students to feel their way into characters and consider possibilities through action and visualisation. A number of teams are offering students more choice in their reading and are timetabling time for silent and sustained reading during the school day. Another team is improving attitudes to reading by inviting all teachers and school leaders to share personal stories about reading and texts that have moved them or shaped identity. At the heart of this project is the process of working in interconnecting communities of practices over the course of a year, where the opportunities to share practice and new understandings across schools and systems occur. At the end of the year, teachers share examples from practice, often in the form of film footage as well as their students' ongoing feedback at the VATE state conference. This experience is a meaningful, public opportunity to identify what has been learned and the impact new approaches are having on students. It has also been an effective way to build interest in the project. In its first year we had 6 applications from schools; in its third year 23 schools applied to take part.

Conclusion

According to Manuel (2012b) the research consistently suggests that 'only a small minority of struggling adolescent readers have problems attributable to a learning disability' (p. 234). What seems more prevalent is the growing number of students who read in passive and disconnected ways at school and who appropriate meanings decided for them by others. Most of the students we interviewed had positive and insightful things to say about the process of reading when it is a dynamic, empowering and imaginative process. As Manuel (2012b) suggests 'mind numbing' pedagogies created by the high stakes testing environment potentially affect struggling readers as well as competent readers in worrying ways (p. 229). Of particular concern, is the way 'circumtextual' framing (Reid, 1990) is locking students into certain ways of reading and thinking about texts so that the process becomes less imaginative and more prescriptive and formulaic. We argue that a focus on what students say about their reading experiences can give us rich insight into what they know and are able to do and should guide us in where we go next in our teaching.

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