Transforming primary school teachers' perceptions of the 'place' of teaching reading: the role of Reading to Learn methodology

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the interventionist study on the role that Rose's (2005) Reading to Learn methodology plays in transforming primary school teachers' perceptions of the role of explicit teaching of reading for educational success. Located within the qualitative case study design, the study used semi-structured interviews and the reading literacy intervention called Reading to Learn methodology to generate data. The study was conducted in grades 3 and 6 classrooms in a rural primary school in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa, and the research site and study participants were selected purposively. Research findings reveal that the Reading to Learn methodology has the potential to undo classroom practices that favour the elite and marginalise the majority, and transform teachers' perceptions of the 'place' of teaching reading explicitly within formal education. With sufficient exposure to this pedagogy, learners across class lines have the opportunity to experience education for all, epistemological access, and education for success.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of reading is cited in many seminal studies as probably one of the most problematic areas in the educational arena, resulting in dismal statistics in Literacy and Numeracy both in South African schools and internationally (Saville-Troike, 1984; Wells, 1986; Pretorius, 2002; Ribbens, 2008). The trajectory of these results points to some serious deficiencies, necessitating the adoption of literacy interventions in schools in many education systems and calling for concerted efforts by researchers to diagnose these untenable trends. In Ribbens (2008: 106) words:

> Poor levels of academic literacy are a matter of concern and reading intervention campaigns have been put in place, not only locally, but also in America and the United Kingdom. The front page of The San Francisco Chronicle of 16 August 2006 reads: 'Fewer than half of California's learner can read or calculate at grade level nearly a decade after the state began its top-to-bottom overhaul of public education …' In Britain, too, because of the poor performance of pupils, 2008 has been declared 'National Year of Reading'. In South Africa decisions to tackle the problem afresh were taken before

the announcement of the results in late November 2007 of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).

As reflected above, this quandary is indeed a worldwide dilemma, and one that causes raptures among the international community. That learners cannot 'read and calculate at grade appropriate level' speaks directly to these deficiencies in Literacy and Numeracy. Within the South Africa context, this state of affairs has resulted in the proliferation of research that interrogates the reciprocal causality of poor academic performance of South African learners in Literacy and Numeracy and their poor reading habits (Moloi & Strauss, 2005; Howie et al., 2007; Pretorius & Mampuru, 2007; Sailors, Hoffman & Matthee, 2007; Fleish, 2008). Several studies have also assisted in yielding data to illuminate these unflattering trajectories. Firstly, there is South Africa's participation in various international studies such as the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. Secondly, there are other local studies, such as Systemic Evaluation and Annual National Assessments, which track learner-performance in Literacy and Numeracy. Most of these endeavours consistently implicate the learners' poor reading literacy as 'relation-able' to poor academic achievement, thereby confirming this uncanny symbiosis between the two. Pretorius' (2005) study on the relationship between reading abilities and examination performance reports:

> Between 1998 and 2001 quantitative assessment of the reading abilities of undergraduate learner was taken at the University of South Africa (Unisa), and the relationship between reading ability and academic performance examination. The findings consistently revealed a robust relationship between the ability to comprehend expository texts and academic performance (Pretorius, 2005: 790).

A number of studies (Lemmer & Manyike, 2012; Nassimbeni & Desmond, 2011; Van Staden, 2011; Hugo, 2010; Christie, 2005; Howie, 2008; Pretorius & Mampuru, 2007; Pretorius & Machet, 2004) have in fact corroborated the findings raised above as a system-wide problem – from primary school through to university. It is research findings such as in those studies that have encouraged us to investigate the phenomenon, particularly in a rural, underprivileged setting, and to use a curriculum intervention as a vehicle.

It is against this background that the goal of this paper is to report the research findings of an interventionist study of primary school teachers' perceptions of the role of explicit teaching of reading for educational success. The paper hopes to reveal the extent to which Rose's (2005) *Reading to Learn* (RtL) pedagogy, when used as an intervention, has the potential to:

- undo classroom practices that favour the elite and marginalise the majority
- transform teachers' perceptions of the 'place' of teaching reading explicitly within formal education.

With sufficient exposure to this pedagogy, the paper argues, all learners can have equal opportunity to experience education for all, epistemological access, and education for success.

DEBATES ON READING DEVELOPMENT: A BRIEF SURVEY

The challenge of poor reading within learning environments that are located in disadvantaged communities is a global phenomenon (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Sherwood, 2000; Elley & Mangubhai, 1997; Smith & Elley, 1997; Greaney, 1996; Stern, 1994; Crossley & Murby, 1994; Walker, Rattanavitch & Oller, 1992; Verspoor, 1989). Drawing from different theoretical orientations, many scholars have tackled this subject. Steeped in the authority cultured by their positioning, such scholars make assumptions and generalisations

about the teaching and learning process, including reading instruction. In the articulation of their various positions on reading emerge two strong voices – those who draw inspiration from the Immersion Theory (IT) and those who come from a Direct Instruction (DI) orientation. Therefore, the following brief literature is reviewed with an express agenda to distinguish between the two Schools of Thought, but importantly also to decipher what informs their orientation.

Elley (2000: 235), a fierce global proponent of the IT, observes that classrooms in developing contexts:

> still consists of an under-educated, underpaid teacher, in charge of 40-50 pupils in a bleak overcrowded room, with bare walls and tiny blackboard. The pupils are typically learning in a second or third language, by rote authoritarian methods, with the aid of a few textbooks, often of doubtful quality and marginal relevance to the children's interests. There is no school or classroom library and virtually nothing of interest for the children to read. Few teachers are enthusiastic about their calling.

As evident in the above quotation, Elley (2000) identifies the problem of poor literacy levels in impoverished contexts as having to do with lacking meaningful and deliberate reading practices, lacking relevant reading materials and, lacking enthusiastic teachers. It is for this reason that Elley (2000) argues for a 'back-to-basics' approach, a revisiting of general conditions in developing contexts. He advocates for the channelling of energies and time towards the creation of enabling environments in these classrooms, but also to the reinvigoration of the teacher capacity and teacher morale as starting-points. Importantly, he acknowledges the pivotal role of the teaching of reading in that process of 'resetting' the classroom.

It is interesting to note, however, that Elley (2000) summarily equates classrooms in developing contexts with educational crisis because they are usually associated with poverty and disadvantage. It may be argued that not all developing world classrooms have this character and tendencies described above. Furthermore, some countries in the developed world do exhibit semblances of developing world character in their classroom practices. The proliferation of research on poor learner attainment even in typically developed countries like the United States and United Kingdom accounts for this fact. Good, Simmons and Smith (1998), for example, in their 'Effective academic interventions in the United States: evaluating and enhancing the acquisition of early reading skills' and Barley and Beesley's (2007) 'Rural school success: what can we learn?' both exemplify this notion.

Also in concurrence with Elley (2000), Ling (2012) supports the stance of Immersion Theory by advocating the 'Whole-Language' approach and championing its application to the teaching of reading in English. He recounts the advantages of this theory:

> Firstly, with this theory, it becomes easier and more possible for the learner to understand the whole text. Secondly, it blends the practices of listening, speaking, reading and writing into an organic unity, avoiding developing the reading ability only in the teaching of… reading. Thirdly, it adopts informal assessment so that the learner can get a more objective score (Ling, 2012: 152).

These advantages are noted and welcome, but Ling (2012) barely touches on the disadvantages. The pitfalls of the 'Whole-Language' Theory are also well documented. Its failure to attend to systematisation of the teaching of grammar is a case in point. Its 'ad hoc' approach to the teaching of grammatical subtleties and rules, furthermore, ensures that only the aspects of grammar that appear in the text stand any chance of receiving attention in the reading lessons. At worst, this approach apportions the teacher an insignificant role of a 'well-meaning bystander' (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993) in the hope that learners will assimilate grammatical rules, a typical role for teachers associated with progressivist theories. Getting the overall sense of the text, although vital, does not supersede the experience of generating and learning new vocabulary whilst learning to read and reading to learn (Snow, 2002; Spear-Swerling, 2007).

A study was conducted in the rural districts of the United States to identify ways to help rural schools improve teachers' pedagogical skills by examining changes in reading skills through the primary grades, after the implementation of a 'highly structured and explicit reading curriculum' (Stockard, 2011: 1). Schools in such districts believe in explicit reading instruction which is part of the DI corpus of reading literacy methodology. 'Examples of strategies used in such programmes include clear instructional targets, modelling, guided and independent practice with corrections, and assessments embedded within the instruction' (Stockard, 2011: 2). In this approach, the teacher is at the centre of the action, guiding the learning process, and ensuring the teacher-learner interaction. Stockard (2011: 3) insists:

> The approach attempts to control all the major variables that impact student learning through the placement and grouping of learners into instructional groups, the rate and type of examples presented by the teacher, the wording that teachers use to teach specific concepts and skills, the frequency and type of review of material introduced, the assessment of students' mastery of material covered, and the responses by teachers to students' attempts to learn the material.

The results of the analysis showed that from 'kindergarten' to Grade 3 learners; cohorts with full exposure to the programme had significantly higher reading literacy scores than those in cohorts with less exposure. Most importantly, the results illustrate how, through DI, rural school districts arguably can improve student achievement, despite the disadvantages accompanied by being in a context far removed from city life. Results also showed that the programme was most likely to succeed when teachers fully understand the programme, and when learners are introduced to it at an early age. This methodology bears strong affinities with Rose's (2005) *Learning to Read: Reading to Learn* methodology used in the research and reported in this paper. Many aspects of this programme – Reading Mastery – appear to have been considered in the *Learning to Read: Reading to Learn* methodology, and they depict an admissible degree of sensitivity to the unfortunate situation of rural schools and communities, the research context in this paper.

In his 'Beating educational inequality with an integrated reading pedagogy', Rose (Christie & Simpson, 2011) provides an account of how in the late 1980s he and his colleagues developed a pedagogy from the experience he had with the underprivileged Pitjantjatjara indigenous community in Australia. This community suffered a disaster of self-destruction, primarily because their inferior education could not pull them out of the quagmire of disadvantage. Rose (2010) relates how virtually every child of school-going age in this community was addicted to substance abuse and lived a life filled with despair. Fundamentally, he discovered that learners could not read at age appropriate levels, despite their teachers having been trained to similar degrees as their counterparts in other Australian state-funded schools. In Rose's (Christie & Simpson, 2011: 14) words: 'Whatever other problems were hampering the education of these children, their inability to read the school curriculum was clearly an overwhelming stumbling block'. He later asserts that this was to be discovered to be a worldwide phenomenon for all communities in distress.

Rose (2005) took the challenge on as a Social Justice project to try and reverse the social inequalities endured by this community through interventions in the classroom setting. He used a series of studies (Rose, 2004; Gibbons, 2002; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Alexander, 2000; Malcolm, 1991; Folds, 1987) to devise a methodology that involved question-response-feedback pattern, backed it up with the 'Scaffolding reading and writing for Indigenous Children in School', a programme developed in collaboration with his colleagues in other initiatives targeted at disadvantaged communities (Rose 2008; Christie & Martin, 1997). He noted that non-exposure to early reading (parent – child reading) had a direct bearing on the learners' performance, and that learners in primary schools were not ready to learn from reading as expected. Rose (Christie & Simpson, 2011: 19) notes:

The key difference with the Pitjantjatjara children was not just that a non-English language was spoken in the home, since a high proportion of other Australian children also come from non-English speaking families, but that there was no parent-child reading in the home. International research has shown that children in literate families spend up to 1000 hours reading with their parents before they start school.
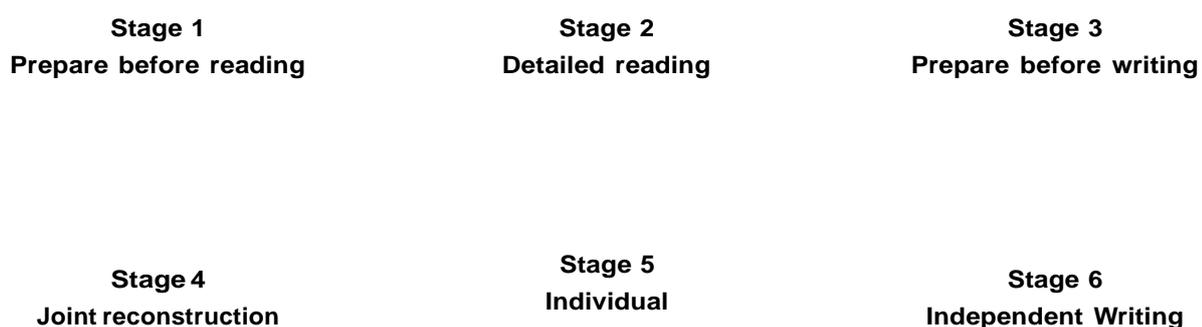
His pedagogic approach, *Reading to Learn* methodology, was then structured and used to breach these shortcomings. It is '… developed in response to current urgent needs, particularly of Indigenous and other marginalized learners, to rapidly improve reading and writing for educational access and success' (Rose, 2005: 131). The focus is on the teaching of reading and writing to democratise the classroom, i.e., to enable learning for, and ensure meaningful classroom participation of, children who come from less advantaged backgrounds, and frequently experience a gap between home and school literacy practices.

To develop this methodology, Rose (2005) drew from the Vygotskyan, Hallidayan and Bernsteinian theories of Social Learning, Systemic Functional Linguistics and Pedagogic Devise theories, respectively. The principles from Vygotsky's (1981) idea of learning as a social process, Halliday's (1993) conception of language as embedded in social context, and Bernstein's (1999) notion of pedagogic discourse, are put together in the development of the *Reading to Learn* methodology to scaffold learners whose literacies do not necessarily match with those that schooling requires (Gee, 1991). While the former type of literacies is much more context dependent, verbal, and generally thrive in face-to-face familiar contexts, the latter is context independent, generally written, and is not at all dependent on physical proximity between the addresser and addressee (Bernstein, 2000).

To realise the goals of the *Reading to Learn* methodology, a 'Scaffolding Interaction Cycle' is implemented. This cycle suggests that, in engaging with written texts, teachers need to ensure that learners are provided with prompts or cues they need to understand sequences of meanings at the level of the whole text, paragraph, sentence, wording, and sound/letter patterns. It insists that the pattern needs to be repeated through each activity in the sequence that makes up the scaffolding approach. When implemented in the classroom context, the Scaffolding Interaction Cycle underpins a series of activities in two carefully structured pedagogic routines, or 'lesson sequences': one for narrative texts, and one for factual texts (Rose, 1999).

In applying the Scaffolding Interaction Cycle, illustrated in Figure 1, each activity during the lesson sequence draws on the discourse pattern of the text to provide the degree of support learners require to understand and recognise patterns of meaning in the text at a number of levels: the genre of the text and the way meaning unfolds, the sentences and wording of the text, and the sound/letter or spelling patterns in the text.

Figure 1:
The 6 stages of the Scaffolding Interaction Cycle

| **Stage 1** | **Stage 2** | **Stage 3** |
| **Prepare before reading** | **Detailed reading** | **Prepare before writing** |

| **Stage 4** | **Stage 5** | **Stage 6** |
| **Joint reconstruction** | **Individual** | **Independent Writing** |

In the Prepare before reading stage, the teacher reads the text out loud and summarises it. The learners listen and get the idea of the passage. They then read the passage, sentence-by-sentence, which is the Detailed reading stage. It is also in this stage that the teacher gives meanings of words in each sentence. At this point, all the learners can read after the teacher and develop confidence in reading that passage. During the Preparing before writing, the learners manipulate sentences on card board strips to practise spelling (Primary School), or make notes from the passage to practise spelling in that exercise of taking notes (High School). This sets the stage for Joint reconstruction. At this stage, the whole class writes a new story, passage on the chalkboard. Here the class uses the same words in the passage read, to create a new story, new events, new characters, new setting. In factual texts, the passage read is re-written via the notes that the learners wrote. However, the language used is that of the learner, not of the text. This is also a whole class activity or a group activity. Individual reconstruction, a crucial stage, sees the learner writing a new story, as an individual, using the same words to create his/her story. In factual texts, the passage is re-written via the notes, but this time the learner writes alone. It is the final stage, the Independent writing, where the learners are given a task. Here they write as individuals and the task is assessed.

As the word 'Cycle' implies, these teaching strategies are on-going, allowing learners to improve over time, and have been proven to enable weak readers within rural contexts to learn to read rapidly and write at grade appropriate levels. They have also advanced learners to develop language understanding well beyond their independent competence (Mgqwashu, 2011, McRae et al., 2000). They draw on principles of scaffolded learning (Wells, 1999), functional linguistics (Halliday, 1993) and genre approaches to writing (Martin, 1993, 1999, 2001), in a form that is accessible, practical and meets the needs of teachers and learners (Martin & Rose, 2005; Rose, 1999, 2005; Rose, Lui-Chivizhe, McKnight & Smith, 2004).

Research context, study objectives, and strategies to investigate the phenomenon

According to the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) (2005) and the Education Policy Consortium, (2005), almost half of South African learners dwell in rural areas where educational underachievement is a major component of a cycle of disadvantage. The research context for this study is a primary school in a 'deep-rural' area that is remote and far-flung. 'Deep rural' in the South African context is associated with poverty, disadvantage and lack of economic and educational opportunities (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, 2015). As the HSRC report further indicates: 'Rural learners frequently attend poorly resourced schools, located in isolated areas, with high levels of poverty, disease and unemployment' (HSRC, 2005: 38). Given the centrality of the teaching of reading in formal education (Rose, 2005), the objectives of the study were to:

1. understand practitioners' perceptions of the role the teaching of reading plays in learner academic performance in grades 3 and 6 at the school

2. the ways in which the intervention confirm or transform teachers' perceptions of the role the teaching of reading plays in learner academic performance in grades 3 and 6 at the school.

The school under study was granted a Quintile 1 status, in keeping with the poverty index of the community the research site serves. Quintile 1 status is a South African classification for schools that are located in extremely impoverished communities. The community around the research context generally has modest facilities, with equally modest, 'humble' buildings. There is no library; no meaningful collection of reading material, no sporting facilities for children, and the school as recent as 2014 was supplied with electricity. The implication in this context is that the research site services children from mostly poor backgrounds who, by virtue of their adverse circumstances, cannot afford to access better educational opportunities elsewhere.

The research site was chosen simply because it represents schools in deep rural areas that are typically disadvantaged schools in the South African context. Internationally, there is a large body of research on the relationship between contexts of poverty and the underperformance of schools (De Lisle, 2011; Ylimaki, Jacobson & Drysdale, 2007). It is a worldwide phenomenon for communities in distress. In South Africa, the learner-performance in schools such as my research site, as already pointed out above, is usually very poor (Department of Basic Education, 2010; 2011; 2012) despite the support that Department of Basic Education (DoBE) purports to be giving to these schools. The DoBE (2012) report on the Annual National Assessments (ANA) recounts some of these interventions:

> Strategies range from the review of the curriculum, the launch of a comprehensive Literacy and Numeracy strategy, comprehensive feedback that was given to schools following the release of ANA 2011 results, learner support materials placed in the hands of teachers and learners, and support given to districts (DoBE, 2012: 6).

Specifically, these schools receive preferential treatment in the form of the National Schools Nutrition Programme (NSNP), a no-fee school status (where learners do not pay school fees at all) and a substantially higher *per capita* funding allocation for learners (Norms and Standards for Funding of Schools, 2009). However, in spite of all these interventions by the DoBE, the 2013 ANA results could only manage an improvement of -1% (Grade 3 HL), 10% (Grade 6 FAL), 12% (Grade 3 Mathematics) and 12% (Grade 6 Mathematics) nationally, inclusive of all schools (privileged and not-so-privileged).

In order to select study participants, we used Stones' (1988: 150) principles on the factors to be considered when sampling study participants. They must:

- have had experiences with the phenomenon being researched
- be verbally fluent and able to communicate their feelings, thoughts and perceptions
- show utmost dedication and commitment to the research by showing a willingness to see it through to its finality.

We thus used purposive sampling to select the study participants. Their circumstances resembled those in the Australian schools where Rose (2011) conducted his study that gave rise to the methodology we implemented as a curriculum intervention in this study. Secondly, as teachers, the participants could communicate in the language of the interview, English. Thus, in so far as expressing their 'feelings, thoughts and perceptions', they were unambiguously clear. Finally, right from the beginning these participants showed a high degree of commitment to the subject investigated in this study. As it will be shown in the data below, this is because they believed the experience would make them better teachers; and hoped that the experience would positively impact on the academic performance of their learners, and wanted to maximise on whatever other 'benefits' that would potentially arise as a result of their participation in the study. The table below illustrates study participants' brief biographical details.

Table 1:
Representation of Participants' Educational Information

Study Participants	Gender	Grade	Qualification	Subjects Taught
Anele	F	3	JPTD	Numeracy, Literacy, Life Skills & First Additional language (FAL)

Study Participants	Gender	Grade	Qualification	Subjects Taught
Bongani	M	6	B. Paed	Mathematics & Natural Sciences and Technology (NSTech)
Celani	M	6	NIL	English & Creative Arts
Dumisani	M	6	NIL	EMS & IsiZulu

As Table 1 indicates, among the study participants, one is female and teaches Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills in Grade 3 (Foundation Phase). She has a Junior Primary Teachers' Diploma (JPTD) from the college of education, while among her Grade 6 counterparts, one teacher (a Head of Department at the site) has a Bachelor of Pedagogics degree, and the two others are not yet qualified (although they are currently reading for Bachelor of Education degrees through distance education). The other three participants are male who teach all six Grade 6 (Intermediate Phase) subjects between them.

While it may be argued that the inclusion of teachers who are not yet qualified, but still furthering their studies, may render the study as invalid as by tacit definition a teacher is one who is qualified to teach, I argue this state of affairs is inevitable in contexts similar to the one under study. It is part and parcel of being defined as a 'disadvantaged school'. It is in keeping with the HSRC (2005) report on 'Education in South African Rural Communities'. This report engages with issues concerning inadequate teacher-qualifications in schools such as the one selected as the research site in this study. It is due to unsatisfactory conditions that the research site has failed to attract a significant number of qualified teachers. Qualified teachers at the research site are constantly looking for schools where there are better working and living conditions. Incidentally, the research site has lost two qualified teachers in the past three years since the commencement of the study as a result of the phenomenon of 'teacher-poaching' that is unsparingly hard-hitting to schools such as this one. These teachers were 'poached' by schools that are based in urban locations, and where conditions of living and employment by far surpass those of deep-rural areas where the research school is located. This is one of the major reasons learners in similar schools often struggle to produce the desired results (Lemmer & Manyike, 2012). A further argument may also arise concerning the use of the two still to be qualified as teachers participants' responses to corroborate or refute the efficacy of the intervention. The reader may not consider their responses as valid. I argue that in fact it is a strength to have such individuals in the study for two reasons. Firstly, they are not yet part of the system, and so have no vested interests into any practices. Secondly, their responses to the intervention were objective as they were not immersed into any tradition whatsoever. In fact becoming part of the study became a useful contribution into their current studies.

After these study participants were purposively sampled, workshops on Rose's methodology began. These workshop sessions were conducted by *Reading to Learn* South Africa. This is a non-governmental organisation established by the South African community of scholars developing research using the *Reading to Learn* methodology. This community engages in research, holds colloquia, seminars, around the methodology across the developed and developing world. The purpose it served in this study was to provide support to the study participants at the research site. More specifically, the workshops involved the following: 1) screened videos for participants on the methodology-in-practice, 2) designed exemplar lesson plans for them on its use, and offered modelling lessons, and 3) conducted lesson observations during implementation and general monitoring of the whole process side by side with us as researchers. Such workshops were necessary for four interrelated reasons. First, they facilitated access to the novelties of the methodology. Secondly and thirdly, they provided well-needed guidance and capacitation the study participants needed in employing the literacy intervention. Finally, they provided participants with practical tools to implement the methodology efficiently. Workshop sessions took place in the afternoons,

over an 18 months period. They sometimes ran well into the early evenings. During these sessions, participants opened themselves up to interviews, especially before and after classroom visits both by the *Reading to Learn* South Africa and by ourselves. They were even willing to make available their entire lesson plans and worksheets, and were open to input. They were also prepared to declare and share their challenges during interviews. Overall, they were unflinching in their willingness to implement the curriculum intervention in their classes.

Kvale (1996: 14) perceives interviews as 'an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest, sees the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and emphasises the social situatedness of data'. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000: 267) on the other hand, caution that 'the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable'. Therefore, this study employed semi-structured interviews as its data generation mechanism precisely because its 'human embeddedness' (Cohen, et al., 2000: 267) could only give substance to the objectives of the inquiry itself. It assumed that the interview, although it 'has its own issues and complexities, and demands its own type of rigour' (O'Leary, 2004: 162), nonetheless illuminated the teaching of reading as a phenomenon. These interviews were conducted both before and after the intervention was implemented. Conducting interviews at both these junctures enabled the study to reveal teachers' readily available perceptions about the role the teaching of reading plays in formal education, and perceptions after the intervention. In both instances, questions asked succeeded in eliciting responses from study participants to ensure the 'rigour' to which O'Leary (2004) refers above. This is because the interview questions in this study demonstrated 'dual goals of motivating the [study participants] to give full and precise replies while avoiding biases stemming from social desirability, conformity, or other constructs of disinterest'. This is the nature of that rigour referred to here. To analyse data, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) was used because it allows the study to engage with generic variations dictated by context of situation, both in the classroom and during interviews. In order to analyse spoken responses to semi-structured interviews, SFL proposes separate 'tree nodes' which get created for story genres and non-story genres, as shown in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2:
'Tree nodes' used to code interviews for spoken genres (adapted from Jordens, 2002)
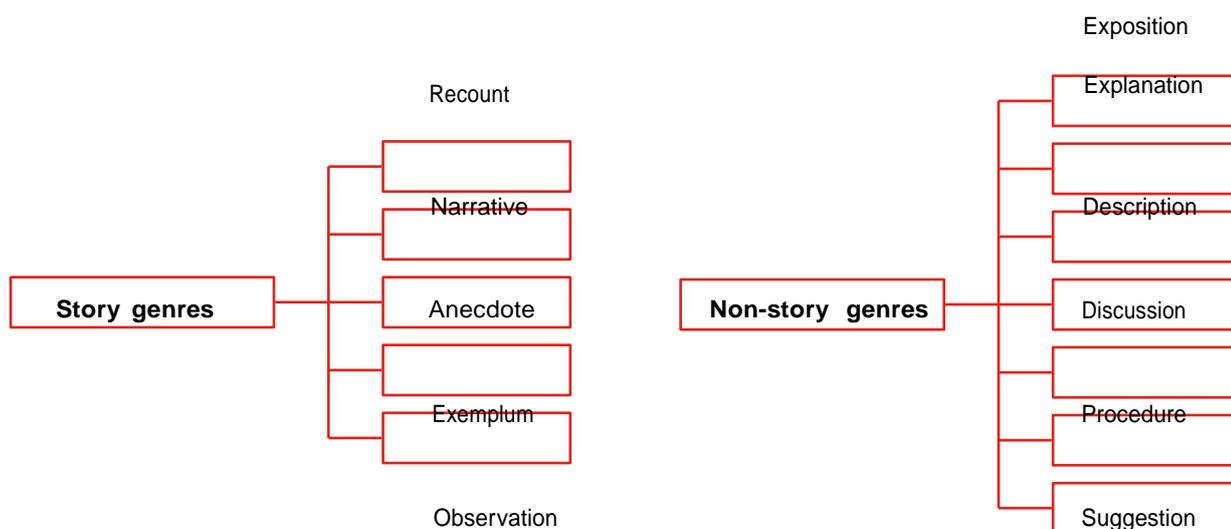
According to Jordens (2002: 110):

The expositions are more characteristic of formal discourse than story genres. Their purpose is to defend an argument, and their structure has been described by Martin & Rothery (1981) as Thesis, Argument, and Conclusion. The arguments function as evidence in support of a Thesis, and in spoken discourse, the Conclusion is usually a simple reiteration of the Thesis. Recount and Narrative are the genres of choice, followed by a phase of Reflection, during which Exempla and Observations are the genres of choice.

The inclusion in the figure of non-story genres is a result of the fact that in some instances during the interviews, study participants may go beyond simple story genres. They may shift from story genres such as Narrative, Recount and Observation to one specific non-story genre: the Policy genre, when they explain government legislation on choice of subjects learners have to make from Grade 10, for example. In such cases, SFL offers the language to speak about such data.

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The essence of the teachers' understandings of the role the teaching of reading plays in learners' academic performance is captured in their responses to interview questions. One of the interview questions was: 'Do you think the Reading to Learn methodology had a role in your learners' academic performance?' Anele, from her Grade 3 (Foundation Phase) perspective, had the following to say in response to this question:

> **Anele:** As far as I'm concerned and in what I've seen in my class, it is very effective because my learners can read, they can write, they can even act or dramatise what they have been reading in the stories. They can do many things that enable them to express themselves (Interview 2, 2014).

In SFL terms, this is an Exposition, presenting thesis, an argument, and a conclusion. She is convinced that the intervention was effective, because her leaners can read (argument), write, and dramatise what they have been reading, and concludes that they can do anything. What she presents is atypical of a Foundation Phase class in a dysfunctional school. It typifies a functioning, properly managed, well-resourced school in urban contexts, not a school classified as Quantile 1 in South Africa. Within the context of the school under study, and the perennial challenges it faces, this response is remarkable. Most importantly, it is in sharp contrast to Anele's responses to interview questions during the 'pre-intervention' phase. During this phase, the same questions asked after the classroom intervention were also asked during the pre- classroom intervention period. In her earlier response, Anele expressed deep frustration with her learners' performance as well as her own teaching practices. During the pre-classroom intervention phase of the study, her response to a question relating to her ability to teach reading was:

> **Anele:** No, actually, the way I [teach] reading in my class, I'm not satisfied because I can see there is a problem with my learners; not all of them can read; most of them cannot read. There are few learners who can read properly (Interview 1, 2012).

In this instance, Anele's response comes in a form of a Recount, followed by a Narrative, and closes with a Reflection. The way she has been teaching reading concerned her and dissatisfied her, this is compounded by the problems she sees with her leaners, as not all of them can read properly. This type of Reflection, Narrative and Reflection changes after the intervention commenced in January 2013. She seemed to have regained self-belief (earlier no confidence in the way she taught reading) and her learners appeared to be responding (earlier not all of them could read) to her new impetus. Commenting on the workshops conducted by *Reading to Learn* South Africa and her perceived impact on her, Anele this time exudes confidence, as revealed by this response:

> **Anele:** What I can say is that *Reading to Learn* has opened my eyes. I was teaching reading, but I can see now that I was doing nothing. I was just playing with children. Now I can see what I am doing.

And it is very exciting to see that your learners are doing what you need them to do at that particular time (Interview 2, 2014).

This is a bold statement, especially coming from a study participant whose initial perception of her role in the teaching of reading was not favourable. It is a clearest indication that she feels that the *Reading to Learn* methodology is working for her. The intervention has transformed an understanding of her role from an uncertain and 'unsatisfied' practitioner, into a bold and confident one. This transformation is critical in the context of the study because it reinforces the centrality of the role the teaching of reading plays in enhancing learners' academic performance. Such a transformation, furthermore, reveals the extent to which the teaching of reading is a fundamental pedagogic resource that cannot be ignored in formal education. In Bernstein's (1990: 53) terms, 'beyond the book is the textbook, which is the crucial pedagogic medium and social relation'. Anele's Grade 6 counterpart, Celani, corroborates her assessment of *Reading to Learn* and notes:

Celani: I think yes, it is effective. It gives more chances to children to know how to read and write as well' (Celani, Interview 2, 2014).

Dumisani's understanding of *Reading to Learn*, however, as much as it is in harmony with those of his colleagues, adds a dimension that reveals his deep-seated ambivalences about the methodology:

Dumisani: My take is that it can be effective if you put in the right time because if you apply it, basically, you need to have a lot of time. You can't just say you are doing this now then you break and come back and do that. After you have mastered it, it can be effective. The first point you have to do you have to master it, after you have mastered it you can try to implement it. And it will depend on the type of learners that you have in order for it to be effective (Dumisani, Interview 2, 2014).

Dumisani's response is constructed as a Recount, Narrative, both of which are followed by a phase of Reflection. His take that it can be effective arises out of his experience with implementing it, hence an indirect Recount of his experience. But he moves on to a Narrative, and implies that one cannot simply do it once and believe positive results will emerge. His Reflection reveals some degree of understanding the intervention since he now believes that once one masters it, it can be effective, but also that it depends on who the learners are. His Reflection genre reveals something critical. It mirrors the general attitudes prevailing in education circles the world over, and which methodologies such as *Reading to Learn* are designed to counter. That the intervention's success depends on the applicable complexities of the context, such as 'the type of learners that you have in order for it to be effective', to use Dumisani's words, is being challenged by Rose (2004).

To critique Dumisani's notions, it may be argued that he does not think beyond the realms of sequencing and pacing of the curriculum. The 'prepare', 'task' and 'elaborate' format (a foundation for the *Reading to Learn* pedagogy), particularly in Detailed Reading, as described in the Scaffolding Interaction Cycle, initially takes up too much time for someone who is concerned about 'finishing the syllabus' at a specific point during the year, as implied in Dumisani's understanding above. The irony with obsession about completing the syllabus at the expense of developing a learner's reading ability is that, even if such a syllabus is completed, it is debatable whether learning would have taken place. The fact that the *Reading to Learn* stages build a solid basis, initially albeit slowly, in order to accelerate learning later is not clear to Dumisani during this phase of implementation. His second issue: 'it will depend on the type of learners that you have in order for [*Reading to Learn* methodology] to be effective', reveals that Dumisani has deep reservations about learners who are 'too disadvantaged' to cope with the demands of the methodology in his subject. While Dumisani's concern has merit, it is ignorant of the methodology's core principle and the reason for its development. In Rose's (2005: 131) words, the methodology 'has been developed in response to current urgent needs particularly of Indigenous and other marginalised learners, to rapidly improve reading and writing for educational access and success'. Thus, the context of Dumisani's learners

should not be a make-or-break factor. In fact, the methodology is intended to alleviate the effects of the context of learners he teaches by reshaping the classroom discourse and challenging the distributive rules. Even the usually 'rebellious' Bongani surprisingly expresses approval regarding the methodology:

> **Bongani:** If we talk about the effectiveness of *Reading to Learn*, yeah it is very effective because it's more learner-centred, but also the teacher has a lot to do. I mean, it involves all the parties that are involved in teaching and learning. So it's a good method of teaching, and it also improves the reading skills of our learners, which is the most important thing (Interview 2, 2014).

This is a crucial understanding of the *Reading to Learn* methodology, considering the ideological struggle between progressivist and traditional pedagogies. Bongani places Rose's methodology where it belongs: between the progressivist theories that promote 'immersion' and the more traditional approaches where the teacher was believed to be the 'fountain of knowledge'. In this position, it provides a 'third way' and takes advantage of the strongpoints of the two orientations, in line with one of its founding theories: Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a zone between what learners can do independently and what they can do with the help of teacher. Importantly too, Bongani identifies the improvement of the learners he teaches as evidenced in his statement, 'reading skills of our learners' as the cornerstone of Rose's methodology. This is important because it underpins the entire *Reading to Learn* methodology, that what we learn, we learn from reading and that what we write is an application of what we have learned from reading (Bernstein, 1990; Rose, 2004). So strong was the belief in Rose's methodology that Bongani, like most content subjects teachers, formerly a fervent opponent of the teaching of reading before the *Reading to Learn* methodology intervention, had gone full circle. Prior to the *Reading to Learn* methodology intervention, Bongani gave a response that could be considered the most daring conception of whose responsibility it is to teach reading. As a Mathematics and Natural Sciences & Technology (NS & Tech) teacher at Grade 6, when asked if he thought Mathematics teachers should be teaching reading, Bongani boldly retorted:

> **Bogani:** No, not at all. I really don't think they need to teach reading because there's not much of reading in Mathematics. Actually there is not. I mean Maths is numbers. I really do not believe that we must focus on reading because there are language teachers who are doing reading with learners (Interview 1, 2012).

Even when probed regarding the word sums, which effectively are written statements or problems, Bongani was adamant that word sums are merely 'guiding words' and that the thrust is on mathematical concepts that those words are meant to introduce to learners. He was convinced that the teaching of reading is a linguistic function that only a language teacher should exercise. Not only did he transform from this view about the teaching of reading being the responsibility for language teachers, he also became a strong advocate for the centrality of the teaching of reading in formal education. After a lengthy interview late in 2013, he was asked if there was anything he would like to add regarding the *Reading to Learn* intervention as it played out at his school. He simply replied:

> **Bongani:** … if this programme can be introduced to other schools as well, it works for us and I think it will work for other people as well. Otherwise no, there is nothing else that I want to add (Interview 2, 2013).

This shows how the intervention has been able to transform the understanding of this particular practitioner's views on the teaching of reading within the schooling context. Bongani, however, was not alone in calling for the extension of the *Reading to Learn* programme to other schools. Dumisani made a similar plea:

Dumisani: I would ask the Department to make sure that this programme, this methodology, if they could make sure that all schools use it and educators. If we can get support on that because I do understand that there are some things that do have to be tried and tested but trying this methodology now and seeing how it is helping me and my learners, I'd say I'd put a stamp on the Department and say let us try this. I am not shying away from other methodologies that the Department was using, but let's try connecting them with this one, with *Reading to Learn* and see how we move forward, especially in our disadvantaged schools, because the medium of instruction, through *Reading to Learn*, it is made easier. That's how I will add (Dumisani, Interview 2).

Like Bongani, Dumisani is confident that the *Reading to Learn* methodology can help other schools in the same way it assisted Dumisani's learners as reflected in his statement, 'helping me and my learners', a resounding vote of confidence for the methodology, by all accounts. Of even more importance in Dumisani's response, is the recognition that *Reading to Learn* has something special to offer, 'especially in our disadvantaged schools'. The point of Rose's methodology is to galvanise an educational 'revolution' informed by the stark reality of poor academic performance in schools located in underprivileged communities, and Dumisani seems to acknowledge its impact here. Bernstein (1990) remarks that the underprivileged children are being doubly disadvantaged by the current structure of the educational edifice that privileges the wealthy. Dumisani confirms that the *Reading to Learn* methodology represents another 'pedagogic device', this time to correct the untenable discrimination against the underprivileged by disallowing them access to the knowledge that would make them succeed within formal schooling. To reinforce the notion of poverty and disadvantage, none of the participants could claim the active involvement of the community, especially the parents, in the education of their children, a consequence of this social structure. Even the support for *Reading to Learn* is, for these parents, largely irrelevant.

Celani: Actually I can say, the community that we are working in, they are very poor and I think they are not involved at all. They don't do follow-ups even after school hours with their children. Sometimes they don't come even to our meetings. I don't think they are involved at all (Interview 2, 2014).

Celani's observation is prevalent in extremely disadvantaged communities, where it is unrealistic to expect impoverished communities to provide a meaningful second 'site of acquisition' (Bernstein, 1990: 78) at home. It is for this reason that, in such communities, the school remains the only site available for upliftment. It thus remains doubtful that the children of the poor must learn to read from the home environment and Celani's statement is a subtle reference to this phenomenon. *Reading to Learn*, therefore, seems to be committed to bridging the divide between the learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and the schooling context.

In these learners' homes, providing tuition at home is almost impossible. Thus, the *Reading to Learn* methodology is designed to provide hope for these learners. The intervention discussed in this paper is seen as having contributed to learners' improvement by Anele, and so too do her colleagues. Bongani was asked if his learners thought they were improving their skills.

Bongani: For them, they cannot tell you that they are improving their skills but for me, as an educator, I can see that slowly they are getting there, they are improving. I once spoke to my principal and he also discovered that there is a slight improvement in these learners (Bongani, Interview 2, 2013).

This participant, who initially did not support the *Reading to Learn* initiative, believed from what he had observed that *Reading to Learn* improved learners' skills, albeit slightly. Of significance, however, is Bongani's observation that the improvement was happening slowly: 'it's a slight improvement'. This is true because the way that *Reading to Learn* is structured is such that progress is slow at the beginning,

as pointed out earlier. This is important for later development as acceleration begins to take effect and the gaps are eliminated because the basis has been established. Celani also hints at 'slow improvement' when responding to the interview question on whether or not learners evince any academic improvement:

> **Celani:** Yes, some of them. Not all of them that are improving. But some of them you can see that they are coming slowly but surely.

> **Bam:** How do you know this? What's the evidence?

> **Celani:** Their results. What I can say, when it comes to their tasks and assessment, you can see there and then if you're taking the style of *Reading to Learn* of doing these assessments that they are improving here and there (Celani, Interview 2, 2013).

The observations of Bongani and Celani become even more important when considering Dumisani's earlier assertion that it takes time for the teacher to master this methodology, and that it becomes effective only when the teacher has mastered it. It is interesting that the three Grade 6 teachers hold the view that improvements as a result of the *Reading to Learn* methodology are 'slow' for learners. Dumisani concurred with his two colleagues, but provided a different slant:

> **Bam:** Have learners' reading outcomes improved since the school started implementing Reading to Learn methodology?

> **Dumisani:** Some. Some not. Some have improved. Some have not improved.

> **Bam:** Their reading outcomes?

> **Dumisani:** Yes, their reading outcomes, but to those that have not improved I'd say basically it is not up to them to improve. I would say, their problems are more deeper (*sic*) than the education system itself or *Reading to Learn* itself (Interview 2, 2014).

In his reference to learners with learning difficulties, Dumisani's conviction that for learners who have not improved their skills, 'their problems are more deeper (sic) than the education system itself or *Reading to Learn* itself' can be interpreted in two ways. First, it may be seen as praise for the impact of the *Reading to Learn* methodology. That is to say: it has the capacity to improve any learner's skills; so, for those learners who do not show any immediate improvement, they will improve with time (i.e. the methodology can work for them too). However, it also may be seen as a resurgence of a deep-seated belief (understanding) held even before the intervention regarding learners with weak reading abilities who are 'just looking at letters. It's like they are seeing ghosts of words' (Dumisani, Interview 1, 2012) and to which his counterpart, Celani, suggested that they were 'mentally challenged' (Celani, Interview 1, 2012). The 'more deeper' problems may very well be a reference to a common tendency by some teachers to label learners as having learning barriers, much too soon. The fact is that during the intervention, the teachers are attempting to both master and apply the methodology simultaneously. Even though they claim seeing some results, with the exception of Anele, they do not claim full mastery of the methodology. It may well be that the learners who have not shown any improvement are unable to do so because they are still in the process of coming to grips with the new way of reading or that their teachers are themselves still in the learning phase of the implementation; perhaps when they have mastered it sufficiently, it will reflect in the learners' abilities. This is a useful assumption because the *Reading to Learn* methodology has been used successfully even in contexts similar to the one reported on in this paper where learners have particular reading problems.

Another understanding that is either transformed or confirmed by the intervention at the study site is the manner in which participants explain how their learners respond to the *Reading to Learn* methodology. When Anele was asked if her learners enjoyed the programme, she responded:

Anele: They enjoy it a lot. This Reading to Learn has made me to understand all my learners in the class.

Bam: Do they feel like they are improving their skills?

Anele: Yes, they are improving and they are very proud. Those who can read are very proud, they even want to help those who are lacking (Interview 2, 2014).

Anele's admission that she 'understand[s] all [her] learners in the class' and that 'those who can read are proud' are manifest as a result of the reconfiguration of the pedagogic discourse in her class. It is a tacit admission that before the intervention she did not necessarily understand all her learners, and that pride hardly formed part of the discourse semantics. Apart from this, the fact that her learners 'even want to help those who are lacking' is very important. It places emphasis on Vygotsky's (1978) conception of 'the More Knowledgeable Other' in his Social Development Theory. This refers to instances where an adult, a teacher, or even a better-equipped peer, can provide assistance to a (struggling) learner, as exemplified in Anele's response. On the same subject of the learners' response to the methodology, Celani also described how his learners respond as a consequence of the R*eading to Learn* methodology in his classroom:

Bam: Do you think your learners enjoy the Reading to Learn programme?

Celani: Yes. A lot.

Bam: How do you know that?

Celani: The way they raise up their hands, the way they want to answer me back, to respond from the text. Yes, I can say, definitely that they do enjoy it.

Bam: Do you think they are improving their skills?

Celani: In a way, I can say that. The way they are doing, it is clear that this thing is helping them a lot to understand the words, especially the difficult words that they don't understand, words of the similar meanings, all those things like adjectives, yes. That's what I can say. They are improving a lot (Interview 2, 2014).

That learners 'are very proud' (Anele, Interview 2: 2014) and 'they raise up their hands, the way they want to answer … back, to respond from the text' (Celani, Interview 2: 2014) can be attributed to the intervention and attributable to Rose's Scaffolding Interaction Cycle, a pedagogic approach he 'borrowed' from Vygotsky (1978). This is where learners who are ordinarily inept, or suffer from low self-esteem, suddenly regain their confidence when they realise that they are supported to answer the teacher's questions.

CONCLUSION

This paper places the *Reading to Learn* methodology at a strategic centre of the broader reading pedagogy. It elucidates how this methodology seems to be drawing on the strengths of the dominant Schools of Thought in this area of study, namely the DI and IT. More specifically, the methodology is offered as a

preferred intervention option on how best to teach reading in an explicit and, perhaps, comprehensive way in settings of extreme educational disadvantage. With participants drawn from a range of school subject teachers, the study also demonstrates how the teaching of reading has the potential to help learners to attain educational success across the curriculum despite their socio-economic conditions. It reveals that Rose's *Reading to Learn* methodology, with its focus on the explicit teaching of reading, has the capacity to transform the understandings of teachers regarding the role the teaching of reading plays in assisting the learners to achieve better results. Critically, our study reveals the central role that the teaching of reading plays in improving the morale and confidence of both the learners and teachers, and, subsequently, as a result, in improving the learner-academic performance in a rural, educationally disadvantaged setting. It is evident from the data generated that this methodology offers learners from underprivileged backgrounds a rare opportunity: to assist them potentially to compete on an almost equal footing with their more privileged counterparts located in better-resourced environments. In this study, the methodology even transformed teachers' perceptions of the 'place' of the explicit teaching reading.

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