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From Jeddah to Jo'burg: Saudi boys' reflections on issues of social justice in the novel *Journey to Jo'burg*

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Background: Despite the growing recognition of the importance of diverse narratives, children's literature sometimes lacks substantive representation of social justice themes, thereby limiting opportunities for critical engagement and awareness. The study seeks to investigate how exposure to such literature can cultivate critical thinking, empathy, and a heightened social consciousness among children. Through an analysis of their reflections, the research underscores the potential of literature as a transformative medium for fostering awareness and empowering young readers to recognise and question systemic inequalities.

Objectives: The objective of the study was to explore how Grade 4 learners at a school in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, engage with and respond to social justice issues as presented in the novel *Journey to Jo'burg*

Method: The study adopted a case study as a qualitative approach and, as a means of data generation, established a Reading Club as a type of focus group discussion.

Results: The findings suggest that participants engaged with the social issues as presented in the story with empathetic understanding and thoughtful analysis. They demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the struggles of the characters, often drawing parallels to their own lived experiences.

Conclusion: This study revealed that engaging with socially conscious literature, such as *Journey to Jo'burg*, can significantly enhance children's critical thinking, empathy, and awareness of social justice issues. Through thoughtful reflection and personal connection to the text, children were able to recognise and articulate the realities of injustice and inequality, both within the narrative and in their own lives.

Contribution: This research speaks to the power of literature to connect across borders and recognises how South African novels can speak to many readers.

Keywords: reading club; empathy; diverse literature; social justice; critical thinking; agency; mirrors.

Introduction

The act of reading goes beyond just making meaning of words within its sentential context. Reading, particularly in relation to children's literature, the focus of this article, also involves cognitive processes, and is profoundly emotional, participatory, dramatic, embodied, visual, artistic, psychological, and transformational (Wilhelm 2016). Similarly Gee (2018) states that reading should be understood as 'situated language' which embodies context, culture, cognition, and social interaction among other things. These understandings thus helped us to position reading novels as a social practice and expression of shared humanity, and as a vehicle for the formation of self in relation to others (Aubry 2011; Thumala Olave 2021) as 'books for children and young adults are resources for identity work' (Botelho 2021). In this way we also underscore the fundamental role of reading in shaping our understanding of the world. We recognise that when the reader interacts with the text and the text with the reader, there is a selective exchange between the two within a specific context as purported by the Reader Response Theory (RRT) (Mart 2019; Rosenblatt 2018). This foregrounds the reader, what the reader brings to the text, and recognises the validity of the response which is the result of the interaction between the two (Spirovska 2019). In this way, reading allows readers to immerse themselves in the experiences of characters which may help them cultivate a greater understanding of emotions and thus ultimately foster empathy in real-world interactions and contexts. According to Boler, various researchers, such as Nussbaum (1995), have suggested that reading novels awakens the 'social

imagination' which allows the reader to identify with the 'other' (Boler 1999) and develop a moral compass. However, Boler (1999) also distinguishes between 'pity' – showing a concern for someone – and 'empathy', which involves a closer identification with a character's predicament. She problematises this further by suggesting that passive empathy, which does not lead to action or change, is limited as empathy 'produced within networks of power relations' (Boler 1999:261). Despite this critique, there are many literary scholars whose research attests to the power of literature to evoke strong responses among readers (Denham 2024; Fernandez-Quintanilla 2020; Herb & Betts 2024; Jocius & Shealy 2017). As we were working with young students to introduce the practice of reading for pleasure while developing their English language skills, we were interested in all reactions to the readings. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore how Grade 4 boys at an international school in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, respond to social justice issues in the novel *Journey to Jo'burg* and how their perspectives and experiences influence their responses. The research question that guided this study was: How do Grade 4 learners at a school in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, engage with and respond to themes of injustice and inequality in the novel *Journey to Jo'burg*?

Contextualising the study

The context for this study was an international all-boys school in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, named Red Sea International for the purpose of this article. The Grade 4 participants all came from relatively wealthy backgrounds. Although English was not the participants' first language, they had a high level of proficiency which, in part, can be attributed to the context of the international school which is oriented towards preparing learners for tertiary education outside of Saudi Arabia. Subsequently, there is a strong institutional focus on the development of English proficiency across the curriculum with all academic subjects taught in English, and only Arabic language and religious subjects taught in Arabic. The core text, *Journey to Jo'burg* by Beverley Naidoo, used for this study had themes of inequality, poverty, and hardship; realities that we believed many of the participants would not have been exposed to given their financial privilege and what it affords. In *Journey to Jo'burg*, set in apartheid South Africa, Naledi, a 13 year old girl lives with Nono, her grandmother, Tiro, her 9 year old brother, and their baby sister Dineo in an impoverished village 300 km outside of Jo'burg. Dineo falls sick and, despite Nono's best efforts, Dineo's situation does not appear to improve. Worried that her little sister is dying, Naledi coerces Tiro to go and find *Mma* who works in (Jo'burg). Along the road to Jo'burg they encounter many challenges including sore feet, fatigue, hunger, dehydration, discrimination, and almost being killed. But they also encounter kind, generous black people including the orange farm worker who offers them oranges and sneaks them into a barn to sleep, a truck driver who offers them a lift to Jo'burg and eventually Grace who helps them locate *Mma*. Upon finding *Mma*, they realise that she works as a domestic help in Jo'burg for a wealthy white family (who were not too pleased when Naledi and Tiro arrived). *Mma* is given a few days leave and she travels back to the village by train with the children. On their return, Dineo is taken to hospital where they wait the entire day to see the doctor, but she eventually gets better and is discharged from hospital.

Theoretical framework: Reader Response Theory

The RRT served as the theoretical framework for this study. At the centre of the RRT is the acknowledgement that there is an interplay of influences in the process of meaning making and, unlike other theories of reading, focuses the reader, their experiences, and their responses to literary work (Mart 2019; Rosenblatt 1994). The RRT regards reading as a transactional process whereby the reader draws from their lived experiences, beliefs about the world, assumptions, and expectations to interact with the perspectives of the text, and in this way, meaning is negotiated as a result of this transaction (Spirovska 2019). Reader Response Theory also underscores that responses to texts do not only come about because of intellectual insight but also through a reader's emotional investment in the text (Johnson, Koss & Martinez 2018). Through engagement with peers, and in a conducive environment, readers can 'further their depth of interpretation' (Mart 2019). A RRT approach is more than allowing participants to voice their understanding but can also foster deeper understanding and critical thinking (Selvera & Garvedia 2025) For this study, this meant that when participants engaged with *Journey to Jo'burg*, a text that represented vastly different realities compared to their own, it opened up a space for the boys to reflect, and in a way confront their own positions of privilege. For a monocultural, privileged, and often sheltered context, the RRT not only served as a *mirror* through which to examine and reflect on own privilege but also as a *window* and sometimes a *glass sliding door*, challenging readers to connect with unfamiliar experiences with empathy.

Mirrors, windows and glass sliding doors

The metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, within the context of reading, was conceptualised by Bishop (1990). Through this metaphor, she underscores how books as mirrors allow readers to reaffirm their identities (Botelho 2021), as it allows them to reflect on their own experiences and familiarities and see themselves in the books they read (Bishop 1990; Johnson et al. 2018). She further explains that as windows, books afford readers a glimpse into real or imagined, strange, or familiar lives of others, and finally as a glass sliding door, books offer readers the opportunity, metaphorically to enter the worlds created and recreated by authors (Bishop 1990; Botelho 2021; Johnson et al. 2018). This analogy emphasises the importance of diverse literature in promoting self-identity, empathy, and cross-cultural understanding for young children, and according to Harris (2007:153), this analogy is a 'succinct metaphor for

some of the primary purposes of sharing multicultural literature with children'. We deemed this sharing of multicultural literature important for the Grade 4 Saudi boys, who were the participants of this study, as we believed that it may widen their worldviews, enrich their personal growth and social consciousness, and their understanding of global issues. Similarly, we believed that exposure to and engagement with the real and imagined realities as presented in *Journey to Jo'burg* was important, as it may afford the participants a space to examine their own privileged realities and all that it affords, in comparison to those of marginalised communities.

This book could provide a metaphorical window into the lives of children elsewhere (Cahill, Ingram & Joo 2021). And the desperation of the characters in *Journey to Jo'burg* could also make them aware of the emotional and psychological impacts of injustice and poverty. This is important because the primary schooling years present a crucial period for shaping children's understandings of equity and justice (Adams, Wilson & Patterson 2024), and the engagement with diverse, multicultural literature allows them to encounter possible societal issues in a safe space, as books in a way create a buffer since there is no direct personal risk for the reader (Husband 2019; Lysaker & Sedberry 2015; Witherell 2025). But it does afford the reader a window through which to view these issues, a mirror to see themselves in the text, and a glass sliding door to enter the experience, because engagement with these types of text allows young children to see themselves as agents of change who can build a more equitable and just world (Hayes & Francis 2024).

Much of the literature using Bishop's metaphor of mirrors, windows, and glass sliding doors suggests the importance of diverse literature, where the readers can see their reality reflected in the story (Monoyiou & Symeonidou 2015). This is particularly important for minority groups who may have been overlooked in the children's literature canon (Herb & Betts 2024). Children are more motivated to read and respond with empathy when they recognise themselves in the text (Cahill et al. 2021).

Diverse literature

The call for more diverse, multicultural books in schools has gained momentum over the last few years, which may suggest a move towards more inclusive literature and literacy practices (Botelho 2021; Monoyiou & Symeonidou 2015). This is important because books have the ability to inform the formation of children's views about the world, and by exposing them to diverse accounts, they may learn to foster an appreciation for people, cultures, realities, and experiences that are different from their own (Cahill et al. 2021; Monoyiou & Symeonidou 2015).

Diverse literature is also important as it challenges and encourages readers to critically think about societal norms, inequality, and issues related to justice (Chaudhary 2018; Herb & Betts 2024) which was particularly important for this study where we explored how Grade 4 learners from wealthy, privileged backgrounds responded to portrayals of injustice and poverty as presented in *Journey to Jo'burg*. We were interested to see how their privileged lived realities manifested in their responses in relation to socioeconomic disparities, empathy, and advocacy for social justice. Engagement with diverse, multicultural representations serves as a bridge which connects readers to different, real or imagined, realities - [thus different realities, real or imagined], fosters empathy (Colosimo 2024; Newstreet, Sarker & Shearer 2019) and promotes dialogue (Moreillon 2013; Ntoulia 2022).

Fostering empathy through diverse literature

The notion of empathy was important for this study, as we believe that when people view the world through an empathic lens, they can show a greater appreciation for differences, are more compassionate and understanding of the world, and in doing so, may advocate for social justice (Cahill et al. 2021). While we acknowledge that this is somewhat idealistic and at odds with Boler's (1999) position that empathy also involves a call to responsibility, we also recognise that these were young boys embarking on their own reading trajectories and beginning to take up positions in the world.

Over the last few years, there have been calls for nurturing and fostering of empathy among young readers, which, according to Edlins and Dolamore (2018:302), is the ability to 'recognize, understand, and respond to the feelings of another'. Diverse literature serves as a medium for readers to step into the different real or imagined realities as presented in the texts, encouraging them to understand and appreciate the feelings of others (Junker & Jacquemin 2017). When readers engage with narratives, not only do they learn about the triumphs and struggles of the characters but also reflect on their own emotions (Jarvis & Gouthro 2019) and, in this way, transact with the text (Rosenblatt 1994). A study conducted by Thompson and Lee (2014) showed that engagement with diverse literature fostered empathy and reduced prejudices. Similar results were found in a study conducted by Brown and Fogg (2017), but it also found that by taking an empathic position, readers experienced greater cultural sensitivity and social responsibility, that is, a desire to advocate for social justice.

This engagement with diverse literature is best utilised when young readers can talk about their interpretation of what they read and listen to those of others (Mart 2019). In this way they can clarify their thinking, take a moral stance, and further develop their capacity for empathy. Research conducted by Chambers (1993) noted that participants expressed that they did not know what they thought about books unless they could talk to their peers about it. Thus, in this way then, the conversation around the books becomes equally important as the book (Scheckle 2022). To facilitate this engagement around the text, we established a reading club.

Reading clubs

Reading clubs, sometimes referred to as literacy circles (Daniels 2023) or book clubs (Jocius & Shealy 2017; Petrich 2015), are an empowering, communal literacy practice which centres the reader as an active agent in the process of meaning making from text. An important element within school-based reading clubs is the shift in agency from the teachers to the participants which was a deliberate motivating strategy informing reading club interactions (Scheckle 2022). This study adopted a stance that reading clubs, like literacy circles, focus on the transaction between the reader and the text, where the readers' prior knowledge, experiences, emotions, and their standpoint in relation to what is read as well as their interactions with peers are at the forefront in relation to making meaning and responding to texts (Rosenblatt 2014). In this transactional nature of reading, Rosenblatt (2014) underscores the active agency of the reader in relation to what they respond to. This is referred to as the *efferent-aesthetic* continuum where, in the former, the reader focuses more on the literal meaning of the text and, in the latter part of the continuum, the reader focuses more on the emotions evoked from reading and the connections they choose to make (Rosenblatt 2014).

By focusing either on the nuances of literal text or moods and emotions evoked by the text, or somewhere in between, the reading becomes both a flexible and personalised experience for the reader as an individual and for the community of readers as a collective. This may help to facilitate introspection and personal growth. For this study, the continuum presented an opportunity for the Grade 4 Saudi boys as individuals and as a community of readers in the reading club, to reflect on both the literal and emotional layers as portrayed in *Journey to Jo'burg* which may have encouraged them to think more critically and compassionately about social issues (Jocius & Shealy 2017). Results from studies conducted by Clarke and Whitney (2009) and Herb and Betts (2024) found that engagement within in a reading club can support young readers to engage more deeply with the text as they explore multiple perspectives and get to reflect on personal values, especially in instances where injustice and inequality are portrayed in the texts.

This engagement can be empowering for the readers as they negotiate the meaning they ascribe to the text, and the meaning others in the community of readers ascribe to the text, which may lead to deepened understanding (Scheckle 2022). In this way, the conversation between the members of the reading club brings the text to life as meaning is negotiated and multiple viewpoints are shared (Petrich 2015). In this manner then, reading clubs empower the reader to critique the world, question taken-for-granted practices, and advocate for social change as they negotiate and renegotiate meaning (Jocius & Shealy 2017).

Research methods and design

The aim of this study was to explore how Grade 4 Saudi boys reflect and respond to social justice issues in the novel *Journey to Jo'burg* in a reading club space. To facilitate this, we adopted a case study within a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is the exploration of a phenomenon in its natural setting and relates to the subjective experiences, perspectives, and meanings individuals attribute to their social world (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Lim 2025). A qualitative research approach was appropriate, as it allowed us to explore the nuanced emotions and deliberations of participants as they engaged with complex social issues in *Journey to Jo'burg*. A case study design, described by Yin (2018) as investigating a contemporary issue in its real-life context, allowed us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Saudi boys' experiences and reflections while also contextualising these experiences and reflections in relation to their lived reality in Saudi Arabia and what it affords them. The case study design also allowed us to consider the context of the reading club and transactional nature of the engagements as highlighted in the RRT. The case for this study was the experiences of Grade 4 Saudi boys in a reading club engaging with *Journey to Jo'burg* to reflect on social justice issues. Lastly, we situated this study within an interpretivist paradigm which relates to understanding the social world from the perspective of the participants while also considering the unique context of study (Thanh & Thanh 2015). Interpretivist research also underscores that realities are socially constructed and thus also considers things such as culture, context, and lived experiences in the development of social realities (Willis 2007).

This paradigm was well suited for this study, as it allowed us to consider the personal, social, and cultural aspects that shapes the boys' engagements in the reading club. The interpretivist paradigm also aligns well with the RRT, as they both emphasise the active role of the participants in constructing meaning based on personal experiences and they both value subjective interpretations.

Data generation

As a method for data generation, we established as reading club as a type of focus group discussion. Building on the ideas of Wildemuth (2016), we positioned this as a space where a group meets to discuss and comment on topics relevant to the subject of the research, drawing on prior knowledge and lived experiences. This group discussion format created a safe space where participant contributions were valued (Kromhout & Scheckle 2021) to highlight the individual perspectives of those involved. Although the participants were all emergent bilinguals–with English being highly developed for academic and transnational mobility– we adopted a model for talking about text as proposed by Chambers (1993), but adapted it for this study to stimulate discussions and support participants in their responses. We deemed this necessary not as remedial action but because we believed that emergent bilingualism does not imply complete mastery of language practice, especially for the reading club setting, which was a new way of engaging with texts for them. In this way, it functioned to scaffold and provide language frames that supported deeper comprehension and purposeful engagement.

The first level of discussion relates to sharing *enthusiasm - singular* which relates to participants sharing what the story was about, what they liked and disliked. The next level of discussion relates to sharing *puzzles*: at this level participants share what confused them about the text and where their peers try to clarify these confusions. The third level of discussion relates to sharing *connections*: at this level, participants share what emotions were evoked while reading and discussing the story. They also share if they made any personal connections to the text. The last level of discussions relates to sharing *development* where participants share what they would change about the story and why, or any personal actions that they may consider. Participants were of course not bound by this model for talking about text, but instead it provided a support to enter the conversation. The Chambers model also provided a scaffold for the learners to frame their responses and allowed them more agency to participate and share, especially the connections they made.

Procedures and protocols

Ten participants assented to join the study and are distinguished by pseudonyms, namely Georgy (9 years old); Kai (10 years old); Pink Panther (10 years old); Greg Heffley I (10 years old); Greg Heffley II (9 years old); Captain Underpants I (9 years old); Captain Underpants II (11 years old), Spiderman (11 years old); Max (9 years old); and Harry Potter (10 years old). All pseudonyms were selected by the participants. Participants met for 12 weeks in a comfortable space in the school library to read and discuss books. Engagements were audio recorded and transcribed. During the first 6 weeks of the reading club, participants were allowed to choose and read any books they wanted to. This enabled them to become comfortable with the reading club space and to develop the practice of reading beyond academic purposes. Besides being motivating, choice in the books to read was a recognition of their agency as readers. In weeks 7–12, participants read and discussed *Journey to Jo'burg*, which is the focus of this article. In this way, a safe space had been created in which the learners had agency to choose books and develop a voice in response to books (Scheckle 2022).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from Nelson Mandela University Research Ethics Committee (Human) (No. H18-EDU-ERE-024). Consent to conduct research at the school was granted by the school principal and the guardians of the participants. The participants themselves also signed assent forms. Pseudonyms were applied for the school and participants for confidentiality purposes.

Results

The weekly reading club engagements were audio recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. Thematic analysis, which relates to identifying and analysing patterns in a dataset (Braun & Clarke 2006), was used to build themes. Four main themes emerged: (1) perception of privilege; (2) expanding awareness from self to the world; (3) aspirations for collective well-being; and (4) personal stories and resonance.

Theme 1: Perception of privilege

During discussions, it appeared that the participants became aware that what appears to be commonplace for them was not necessarily the lived realities of others. In Chapter 1 we were introduced to Naledi and Tiro and their plan to travel to Jo'burg to find *Mma* because of their sick sister, Dineo. Many of the participants commented how unfortunate the family's situation was. Kai noted that he felt, 'sad for Naledi and Tiro's family who are poor, they can't even take sick Dineo to the hospital'. Pink Panther remarked how fortunate they were at Red Sea International School to have a medical doctor on site and if they felt unwell at home, they could just get into their cars and drive to the hospital, while Naledi's family did not even have money to take Dineo to the hospital. These reflections reflect empathy and positions the participants to consider the experiences of others more thoughtfully. The story also notes that Naledi and Tiro had to walk for about 2 h daily to get to and from school to which many commented that they could not imagine walking so far every day and how fortunate they indeed are. Max commented that, 'every morning, the driver waits for me and we have the perfect temperature in the car'. In this way, participants are possibly beginning to understand that people's backgrounds shape their lives in many ways. Again, in Chapter 5 participants expressed how fortunate they were compared to some of the experiences Naledi and Tiro had to endure as made explicit in the text. Harry Potter commented that, 'their father died, they were poor, they do not live with *Mma* and they walk for 2 h every day. We are lucky teacher'.

Harry Potter's comment suggests an increased understanding of how his family's economic situation positively affects his life and how Naledi and Tiro's family's situation affects theirs which has also led him and other participants to approach the family's situation with empathy rather than judgement as found in Herb and Betts's (2024) study. Conversations around privilege came about again when the participants read about Mma's employer and where she lived.

Georgy commented that, 'it almost sounds like our houses here in Jeddah; so the description provided a mirror of their own reality. Closely linked to their perceptions of privilege was that it helped foster an awareness of more social justice and global issues.

Theme 2: Expanding awareness from self to the world

Participants appeared to show an increased awareness of concerns extending beyond their local circumstances. In Chapter 2, the author notes that black South Africans had to carry a 'pass' when moving about in South Africa. Many of

the participants showed disdain for this with Max equating it to 'being a prisoner in your own country'. Kai responded to this by saying that many countries have a 'pass' system and noted that, 'like here in Jeddah, foreign people must carry their iqama' (an *iqama* is an equivalent of a work visa). This seemed to provide a puzzle for the boys as Pink Panther countered this by stating that the pass and the *iqama* are not quite the same thing, as in Saudi an *iqama* is only issued to foreigners to show they have legal status in the country whereas in South Africa, 'the people who were born there have to carry it'. This discernment showed that participants became more critical in their responses and were able to show more compassion, and in a way, take a moral stance in relation to injustices.

In Chapter 3, the text recounts that Naledi and Tiro were helped by a farm worker where they were given shelter for the night. The farm workers are described as living in sheds, which led to Harry Potter's discomforting comment that 'sheds are for tools and animals'. Georgy followed this up by commenting that 'white people were so bad to black people'. Later in this chapter we read that the farmer carried a gun. Greg Heffley II responded to this stating that this reminded him of how 'people in America can just buy guns and shoot anyone'. Greg Heffley II obviously thought that this was problematic and this response may suggest an increased awareness of social justice issues and a heightened understanding of policies and their implications. At the start of reading club engagements in week 10, participants were talking about how 'freaked out' they would be if aliens lived alongside us.

This prompted Pink Panther to comment that black South Africans who experienced apartheid were 'like aliens in their own country because they were not free, they could only move where the pass allowed'. This comment again spoke to how reflective many of the participants were in their responses and to how they internalised the practices in the reading club by making connections, in this instance a topic of interest to them and the lived experiences of people in apartheid South Africa.

Theme 3: Aspirations for collective well-being

A desire for the well-being of others was also a concern for the participants. In Chapter 3 we encountered the farm worker who sneaked Naledi and Tiro onto the farm and allowed them to eat as many oranges as they wanted to have. Participants expressed their joy in this with Harry Potter commenting that, 'now they will be full' and Pink Panther cheering, 'go Tiro, go' when Tiro was described as over-indulging in the oranges because of his desperation to eat. The camaraderie and kindness shown by the farm worker appeared to have resonated with the participants. In relation to the truck driver giving Naledi and Tiro a lift, participants showed concern for the children as the truck driver did not take them directly to *Mma* in Parktown, Jo'burg. This presented the group with a puzzle which provoked a group discussion about the extent of the driver's help. Max commented that the driver was 'irresponsible for leaving the kids by themselves'. Georgy countered this by stating that the driver surely had a job to do and therefore could not take the kids directly to *Mma*. Max did not agree with this and interjected by saying, 'What if it was you? What if you were Naledi and Tiro, would you not want the driver to take you where you must be?' This concern for Naledi and Tiro's well-being showed the participants' awareness of social issues and people's need to feel safe and cared for.

In Chapter 6 the participants encountered a not-so-friendly bus driver who scolded Naledi and Tiro for trying to board a 'Whites-only' bus. Participants commented on how frightened Naledi and Tiro must have been as they find themselves in an unfamiliar big city. Harry Potter commented that, 'he should have been more kind to the kids because he understands what it is like for a black people because he is also black'. So, for Harry Potter the way in which the bus driver reacted lacked empathy and was devoid of care. Kai, however, felt that, in his own way, 'the driver was looking out for them because maybe they can be arrested for getting on the bus'. This deep reflection from Kai shows a great deal of maturity and personal growth and echoes Denham's (2024) observations of empathy for characters within stories. This discussion of multiple viewpoints and deep engagement with the text is an example of what Mart (2019) terms 'quality talk'.

Theme 4: Personal stories and resonance

One of the most striking things about this study was some of the connections students made in relation to the text. At the beginning of a session, which usually began with the researcher reading a chapter and inviting the boys to comment, Pink Panther asked to share something that had worried him. In Chapter 1, *Mma*, Naledi's mother, is introduced as a domestic worker who works for a white family in Jo'burg, far away from her own. In relation to this, Pink Panther stated that *Mma* reminded him of his own nanny from the Philippines who lived with them. He shared that he was now concerned that 'maybe she is sad because she didn't live with her children', and in puzzlement added that 'she doesn't talk about them a lot'. This was met with silence by the group as the novel held a mirror up for them to look at their own realities differently. Later, in Chapter 6, we were introduced to the Madam, Mma's boss, who did not treat her very kindly. This served as another point of reflection for the boys who shared that in hindsight: they too treated their family's domestic workers in a similar way. Georgy went as far as saying he felt 'a lot of shame' because of how he had treated their domestic worker from time to time. This recognition also served as a call to action as evidenced when reading and discussing Chapter 11, where Georgy remarked, 'I should treat my nanny better'. This, we believe, was a moment of personal growth for many of the participants as it reflected deep engagement (Spirovska 2019) as well as critical insights.

Discussion

Reader Response Theory provided a starting point for valuing the responses of the learners and validating the different views that were shared. Because the theory recognises what the individual brings to the text, contrasting views could be voiced and welcomed. The idea of empathy and compassion was prominent in many of the reading club discussions which suggests a reading community that was characterised by understanding not just the stories read and discussed but also the human connection they inspire. This is closely linked to the RRT which underscores that response to the text is not only an intellectual endeavour, but also an emotional investment on the part of the reader (Johnson et al. 2018). This can also be linked to the efferent-aesthetic continuum as noted by Rosenblatt (2014) as participants engaged not only with the literal meanings of the text but also with the emotional and atmospheric nuances it conveys. This interplay allowed them to experience the narrative on a deeper level, as they connected with characters' feelings and experiences, and moods it evoked (Spirovska 2019). In this way then, the emotive engagement with *Journey to Jo'burg* in many ways served as mirrors, windows, and glass sliding doors in promoting empathy and understanding of people in different contexts (Harris 2007; Johnson et al. 2018). As windows, the novel *Journey to Jo'burg* gave them insight into the lives of others whose lived realities were in stark contrast to their own. The idea of people sleeping in a shed was of great discomfort to Harry Potter. Similarly, the idea that people had to move around with a 'pass' was equally disturbing for Pink Panther as the earlier remarks about sheds and passes showed. In this way, the novel served as a window which gave insight into other children's experiences (Lysaker & Sedberry 2015). These windows thus also allowed participants to grapple with issues of injustice and inequality (Adams et al. 2024). It also allowed them to deal with complex societal issues in a safe space (Husband 2019; Witherell 2025). *Journey to Jo'burg* served as a glass sliding door as the readers were invited 'to step into an experience that may change them' (Johnson et al. 2018:569). The engagement served as point of reflection and a call to action for the participants as Georgy's comment about treating his nanny showed. This was unprompted and was an issue he had mulled over between meetings and he used the reading club space to voice his discomfort. This call to action can be seen as recognition of agency and the ability to build a more equitable and just world (Hayes & Francis 2024).

As mirrors, the engagement with diverse literature allowed the participants to acknowledge and be reflective of their privileged lived realities. In this way, they are validating their lived realities but also fostering a deeper emotional engagement with the text, as it created an awareness that their lived realities are significant but not universal. This awareness thus fosters an appreciation for their realties and those of people that are different from their own (Monoyiou & Symeonidou 2015). Reader Response Theory underpinned the participants' interactions with this text in that they could bring their individual responses to the group in a recognition that there was no fixed meaning. Selvera and Garvida (2025) argue that this approach encourages a personal connection as well as critical engagement which was evident in this study. The group format also allowed meanings to develop and build through shared responses. So, in this study we would argue that RRT, when applied in a supportive interactive reading group, could be expanded to include the development of empathic positions among the young readers. The reading and the engagement around the reading also allowed for it to become a type of situated language in that it embodied culture, cognition, and social interactions (Gee 2018). This situated language was brought about through the engagements which fostered a rich tapestry of experiences through thoughtful engagements and discussions. And thus in this way, the reading club and the engagement allowed participants to be more reflective and critical in their responses (Chaudhary 2018). In a significant way then, the reading and the interactions in the reading club became an expression of shared humanity (Aubry 2011; Thumala Olave 2021) in that participants truly wanted what was best for Naledi and her family and showed a great deal of empathy and compassion for the family's situation. It is our belief, the participants in this study embarked on a journey alongside Naledi and Tiro, experiencing their struggles and triumphs as they navigated the challenges of injustice and inequality.

Conclusion

Although we did not set out to conscientise the participants, they responded to themes of injustice and inequality with a mix of empathy and critical awareness similar to Jocius and Shealy's (2017) study. They expressed deep concern for the characters' struggles, often reflecting on their own experiences and comparing it to those of the characters, which allowed for insightful discussions. The contrast between their lived realities and those presented in *Journey to Jo'burg* allowed them to examine real-world issues and to understand the impact of inequality and injustice on individuals and communities. Considering this, the participants' engagement with *Journey to Jo'burg* in a reading club space reveals several key conclusions.

Firstly, it notes the importance of engaging young learners with diverse literature as it helps to foster empathy and cross-cultural understanding (Lysaker & Sedberry 2015; Selvera & Garvida 2025). In this way too, highlighting diverse voices promoted inclusivity especially in relation to marginalised groups in society (Cahill et al. 2021). The study also highlighted the importance of community: the reading club as a community created a space where participants felt supported in their reading and thus felt free to share their connections and reflect on their experiences. This study attests to the power of reading clubs as sites of deep engagement (Mart 2019; Scheckle 2022) where children's voices are heard and valued (Jocius & Shealy 2017). Participants were invited to respond to the text and form a personal connection through dialogue in line with RRT (Selvera & Garvida 2025). From a sociocultural perspective,

critical responses were brought to the group's shared reading, as the boys connected emotionally and critically with the text. Next, the findings of this study also highlight that books do not only entertain or support cognition but also promote personal growth and self-awareness while adding to the verbal repertoire of the participants (Kromhout & Scheckle 2021). The study also noted how engagement with diverse literature can help children take a moral stance and advocate for social justice. This shift in moral stance could be understood through an extension of how Bishop's metaphor of mirrors could work in responding to text.

Through reading *Journey to Jo'burg* in the reading club, the boys did more than identify with the young protagonists– they stepped into a different world (Botelho 2021). The text also provided a powerful mirror of their own privileged position in which they could also see, almost for the first time, the inequality around them. Their empathic responses and new insights affirmed the potential of literature to highlight themes of injustice and inequality and attest to the transformative possibilities of engaging empathically with literature.

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Competing interests

The author, Eileen M.A. Scheckle, serves as an editorial board member of this journal. The authors, Lincoln L. Jansen and Eileen M.A. Scheckle, have no other competing interests to declare.

CRediT authorship contribution

Lincoln L. Jansen: Conceptualisation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Writing – original draft. Eileen M.A. Scheckle: Conceptualisation; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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