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Wordless picture books in parent-child reading in a South African context

This article is the result of an exploratory study into the feasibility of the use of wordless picture books with the aim of developing a culture and love of reading within the South African context, as approached from the viewpoint of an illustrator. The characteristics of wordless picture books serve as motivating factors towards developing positive attitudes towards books in general. A semiotic and narratological framework illustrates their relevance within South Africa. An empirical study endeavours to gain better understanding of how these books would function in joint reading by a child and a parent/primary caregiver.

Tekslose prenteboeke en die ouer-kind lees-aktiwiteit in 'n Suid-Afrikaanse konteks

Hierdie artikel spruit voort uit 'n verkennende studie na die haalbaarheid van die gebruik van prenteboeke sonder woorde om 'n kultuur van en liefde vir lees in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks te ontwikkel, gesien vanuit die uitgangspunt van 'n illustreerder. Die eienskappe van boeke sonder woorde dien as motivering vir die ontwikkeling van 'n positiewe ingesteldheid teenoor boeke in die algemeen. 'n Semiotiese en narratologiese raamwerk wys op hul relevansie vir Suid-Afrika, terwyl 'n empiriese studie poog om 'n beter begrip te bewerkstellig vir die benutting van hierdie boeke in gesamentlike lees tussen die kind en 'n ouer of primêre versorger.

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Τhe results of a recent qualitative study conducted by the South Africa Book Development Council (SABDC),[1] which investigated literacy practices in South African households, reconfirmed that South African homes lack a reading culture; only 14% of the population are viewed as active readers, of whom only 5% read books to, or with their children.[2] Although the promotion of literacy among previously disadvantaged communities has been a key priority for the government since South Africa's change to democracy in 1994, books promoted by the education department are often purely academic and produced on a tight budget. In order to foster a love for reading, non-governmental organisations such as Biblionef[3] and Project Literacy[4] offer a wider selection of books meant purely for recreational reading in conjunction with their literacy programmes. Despite their inclusion, these recreational reading books are still far outweighed by pedagogic books (Johnson 2009: 13).

Dowhower (1997: 63) outlines the wordless book as a literary genre that relates concepts, portrays themes or a sequence of ideas, gives information, provides entertainment and interaction, and/or tells a story by means of a series of illustrations without a written text. The genre's design does not cater strictly for children, but also appeals to adolescent and adult audiences. As such, a diverse audience on a variety of literacy levels can read the wordless narrative (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006: 9, 21).

With a growing body of literature advocating the use of these books in literacy development, it is surprising that there is a paucity of research on their use within the South African context (Crawford & Hade 2000: 67). In addition, few locally published wordless picture books are available in South Africa. The market is mainly dominated by American or European imports.

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1   <http://www.sabookcouncil.co.za/industry_overview.html>
2   The authors would like to thank the Ikhaya Trust Centre, in particular Adele Botha, the Kayamandi community, and Stellenbosch University for their insight, advice and support during the course of this study.
3   Biblionef is a dynamic book donation agency. Their focus is to provide new books 'to needy children's schools and libraries' throughout South Africa (Biblionef SA). <www.biblionefsa.org>
4   Project Literacy addresses the needs of illiterate and semi-literate adults in South Africa (Johnson 2009: 13).

This article seeks to investigate whether economically viable wordless picture books can be used as an intervention to stimulate a culture of reading, through joint parent-child reading, in the South African home. Joint parent-child reading is a method of stimulating a love for, and culture of reading at the earliest stage. I argue that, due to their specific characteristics, wordless picture books could serve as a medium to foster this culture.

A joint reading programme hosted at the Ikhaya Trust Centre (the Trust) in Kayamandi, a township on the outskirts of Stellenbosch, which retains a rich Xhosa storytelling tradition, served as a means to investigate these ideas further. The Trust provided a safe, private area for uninterrupted joint reading sessions, and its central location minimised the need to travel, as all the participants were local residents. The Trust has run the Sithanda Ukufunda programme (We love learning/reading) since January 2010.[5] The existence of an established literacy programme gave me access to advice and input from Adele Botha, the literacy development and training specialist at the centre, in fields about which I am not knowledgeable, for example early literacy development.[6]

Four wordless picture books were used for the reading programme: *Wave* (Lee 2008) (Figure 1), illustrated by Suzy Lee and published in the US; *Abongi's journey* (Saadien-Raad 2004), a locally produced book illustrated by Tania Rosser for a concept by Kerry Saadien-Raad,[7] and two of my own illustrated books, *Iphi ibola?* (Le Roux 2011) (Figure 2) and *My mother's mat* (Le Roux 2011) (Figure 3)*. These were illustrated specifically for the programme.

5   The aim of this programme is to improve literacy levels by empowering and training facilitators, parents, volunteers and children in Kayamandi (The Greater Stellenbosch Development Trust 2010). <http://www.ikhayatrust.org.za/en/projects/sithanda-ukufunda-literacy-programme.html>

6   "I" in this article refers to Adrie le Roux, the primary researcher for the article. Elmarie Costandius supervised the study and co-authored this article.

7   *Abongi's journey* received the 2002 Vivian Wilkes Award, which is awarded for books that have made a special contribution to South African children's literature (National Library of South Africa).
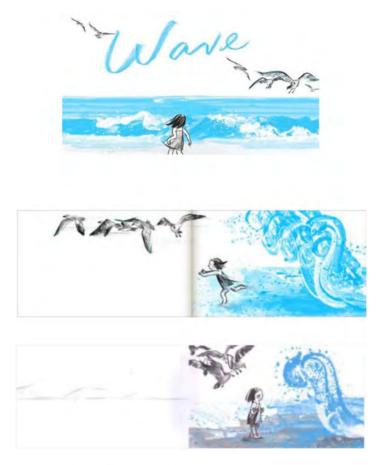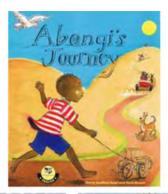
Figure 1: Selected illustrations by Suzy Lee from her book, Wave, 2008.
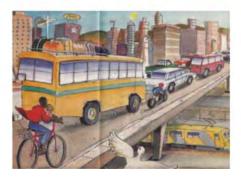Collection: private.

Figure 2: Selected illustrations by Tasia Rosser in Kerry Saadien-Raad, Abongi's Journey, 2004. Collection: private.

Figure 3: Selected illustration by Adrie le Roux, Iphi ibola?, Acrylic, charcoal and collage. Collection: artist's collection.

The results of the reading programme constitute the main focus of this article, as it provides concrete examples of how these books are able to function in a non-educational and, for the most part, 'unmediated' setting. I use 'unmediated' lightly in this instance, referring to the fact that reading sessions were conducted in a private space where only the parent/caregiver and child interacted with each other.

Figure 4: Selected illustrations by Adrie le Roux, My mother's mat, 2011. Acrylic and charcoal. Collection: artist's collection.

Following this introduction, I define in wordless picture books and discuss semiotics, paratext and narratology as frameworks for analysing the manner in which these books construct meaning. I also discuss wordless picture books within a South African context, as well as how this is affected by the local publishing industry and the prevailing lack of a culture of reading in South African homes. In addition, parent-child joint reading and wordless picture books as a motivational factor for reading are mentioned briefly in this section. This is followed by the research methodology and a discussion of the main themes identified by the research.

1. Wordless picture books, semiotics and narratology

Kiefer (2008: 10) refers to illustrator Uri Shulevitz, who argues that "a true picture book tells a story mainly or entirely with pictures. When words are used they have an auxiliary role". Wordless books as a unique art form follow the same tradition: using visual signs to convey meaning exclusively by means of images. The notion of creating a complex narrative solely by means of illustrations is not novel. Yet, for the theoretical foundation of this article, it would be useful to briefly investigate the manner in which this is accomplished. As wordless picture books lack text to 'cue' the reader as to a specific emotion, plot or sequence of events, the illustrations and format of the book communicate in a manner that allows verbalisation on a variety of levels. How does an illustrator create a book that needs to be 'sounded'?

Although semiotics and narratology overlap to a large extent, there are some key differences to be discussed as separate frameworks. Onega & Landa (Herman & Vavaeck 2005: 13) define narrative as "the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal or causal way". This definition allows the tools of narratology to be used in the analysis of wordless picture books and oral storytelling, in addition to the traditionally narrower use of narrative as an exclusively linguistic phenomenon (Johnson 2009: 53). Narrative as such is a means of assigning meaning and function to semiotic texts.

A semiotic text, in turn, denotes anything that is regarded as a signifier of something else. A sign can be anything that has meaning within a given culture or conceptual framework. An initial investigation of the narratology inherent in a text should therefore seek to identify the signs to be found in the text, and the codes within which these signs can be unlocked (Shitemi 2009: 82).

According to Ryan (2011), a semiotic approach to media, with the focus on narrative, examines the storytelling abilities and limitations of the signs of the medium in question. Semiotics, broadly defined as the study of signs, generally distinguishes between three broad media families, namely verbal, visual and aural. A semiotic analysis of narrative media raises the following typical questions: how can images suggest time; how can gestures express causality (Ryan 2011); what

assumptions are made about the reader, and how do these impact on the formulation of the super text and its subtexts and layers (Shitemi 2009: 82).[8]

Wordless picture books make use of all three media families. First, they are visual. The pictures are images which a reader can interpret in a way that reflects his/her past experiences, culture and social context. Perry Nodelman (1988: 186) argues that "children tend to express their enjoyment of wordless books by telling, in words, the stories the pictures suggest to them; they themselves turn purely visual experiences into verbal ones". This statement suggests that wordless picture books also make use of the verbal and aural media forms in creating a narrative text.

Wordless picture books employ a language that relies on visual experience common to both author and reader and, as such, illustrations require reading and interpretation and are not always easily understood (Houp 2003: 3). Nodelman (1988: 186-7) argues that, although they resemble conventional picture books, wordless picture books "require from us both close attention and a wide knowledge of the visual conventions that must be attended to before visual images can imply stories". The semiotic conventions to which he refers include choices of media, colour and style that communicate a mood and atmosphere. Underlying assumptions about left and right, and cause and effect allow us to read meaning into a sequence of pictures (Nodelman 1988: 186-7).

Nodelman (1988: 187) believes that, in the case of wordless picture books, it is important for the reader to recognise that there is a puzzle to be completed in terms of creating a story from illustrations. Readers are required to search for clues and combine seemingly unrelated bits of visual information and, in this manner, interpret data from their own storehouse to complete the pictures (Nodelman 1988: 186-7). Crawford & Hade (2000: 66) state that, when using wordless picture books,

> [c]hildren ... construct meaning through the use of prior knowledge and experiences, attention to intertextual cues, multiple perspective

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8   The super text is a narrative that possesses a variety of narrative properties, whereas a subtext may contain underlying or hidden themes in the narrative (Shitemi 2009: 83).

taking, reliance upon story language and rituals, and the implementation of active, playful behaviors as part of the reading process.

In his book, *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation*, Gérard Genette (1997: 1) writes that texts are rarely presented in an "unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as the author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations". Although not necessarily intended to belong to the text, these productions extend and surround it in order to present it, or as Genette (1997: 1) argues, "to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption in the form ... of a book". He labels these accompanying productions as paratexts. Harris elaborates, noting that:

> [I]n the interface between reader and text, these [paratextual] devices contribute to framing a reader's expectations, mould interpretations, establish a sense of purpose, and influence desire to step inside the text and read on. As such, these features can be as important as the text itself in how they mediate between the reader and the text. ... Authors and illustrators sometimes build intricate relationships amongst book covers, title pages, endpapers, visual media and style, layout and the like. Readers need to decipher not only the devices *per se* but how they work together to mediate the reader (2005: 2, 5).

Wave provides a good example of how layout can help guide the interpretation of a text. The book is printed on a panoramic trim size, which allows for the pages to convey the sheer enormity of the ocean effectively. The wave's movements are depicted from right to left on the page. The gutter of the book is used to represent the end of the shoreline, and serves as a visual boundary until it is crossed by the little girl and her entourage of seagulls (Ha 2008). The characters gradually migrate from the protection of the left side of the page to unpredictability on the right. Lee (2008) uses the physical, concrete construction of the book to signify the triumph over fear and physical limitations.

Paratextual elements work together to substantiate a text's interpretation. Harris (2005: 6-7) is of the opinion that, although some of their meaning may be lost on the reader until the story has been read, the importance of returning to a book's paratext in order to reflect on different layers of meaning and how interpretations are shaped can be emphasised.

Jan Christoph Meister (2011) defines narratology as "a humanities discipline dedicated to the study of the logic, principles, and practices of narrative representation". Bal (1985: 5) provides a breakdown of a narrative text as being:

> [A] text in which an agent relates a narrative. A *story* is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. An *event* is the transition from one state to another state. *Actors* are agents that perform actions. They are not necessarily human. To *act* is defined here as to cause or experience an event (1985: 5).

When assessing the visual signs of a wordless book, the reader ultimately begins to assimilate a specific narrative by ordering signs in a text into time and space. Meaning thus begins to be constructed. Within the field of narratology, narrativity proves to be a practical term in the analysis of wordless books. Narrativity is positioned away from the formalist limitations of structuralist narratology by turning the attention increasingly to transactions that occur between narratives and the audiences that bring them to life. Described as an 'adjectival' noun, narrativity suggests a felt quality, something that is not entirely definable and is subject to gradations (Abbott 2011).

Ryan's (Abbott 2011) distinction between 'being a narrative' and 'possessing narrativity' reveals the difference more clearly: "... where a narrative is a 'semiotic object', narrativity consists of being able to inspire a narrative response". When applied to wordless picture books, the practical advantage of narrativity as a term can be understood as it considers transgeneric and transmedial narratology, which includes narratives in genres and media where words are no longer central to narration and where readers become viewers and active participants (Abbott 2011).

To achieve narrativity, pictures must capture the temporal unfolding of a story through a static frame. Wolf (Ryan 2011) distinguishes three kinds of pictorial narratives: "monophase works that evoke one moment in a story through a single image; polyphase works that capture several distinct moments within the same image; and series of pictures that capture a sequence of events". A series of pictures is necessary to depict a story that is both reasonably determinate and new to the reader (Ryan 2011). As such, wordless picture books as a genre usually fall into this latter category; however, they can

also combine methods, pictures having the potential to convey what Nikolajeva & Scott (2006: 119) call an "omnipresent" perspective through a panoramic view of the setting.

In her discussion of the influence that social context has on the meaning of narrative, Mieke Bal (1997: 118) states that

> even if we do not wish to study relations between text and context as separate objects of analysis, we cannot ignore the fact that direct, or indirect knowledge of the content of certain characteristics contributes significantly to their meaning.

The reading of an image can, as such, never offer a closed reading of a narrative, as both the illustrator and the reader bring factors from their own social environment to the reading (Bal 1997: 118).

2. The South African context

South Africa presents a unique context for the use of wordless picture books because of the so-called first and third worlds coexisting in close proximity. As a case study, the country comprises a privileged minority that represents the affluent "first world", whereas the majority of the population reside in rural areas and urban townships, representing the underdeveloped, poor parts of the country, often referred to as the "third-world" component of South Africa (Molawa 2009: 1).

Few studies have paid attention to the production and use of wordless books within the South African context. Among the few local sources, Katherine Arbuckle (2004: 445-8) investigates the use of illustrations as a singular means of communication, albeit from an educational viewpoint. Further research on a wordless picture book was found in the *First Words In Print* (FWIP) baseline study, by Angela Schaffer & Kathy Watters (2003). This study included *Abongi's journey*, a wordless picture book, as part of the FWIP project run by the Centre for the Book,[9] which aims to ensure that all very young South African children have access to the stimulation of picture books and storybooks in their own language. The baseline

9   The Centre for the Book is a unit of the National Library of South Africa. It strives to promote a South African culture of reading, writing and publishing in all local languages, and easy access to books for all South Africans. (National Library of South Africa n.d.)

report includes a brief outline of how readers responded to the different books. *Abongi's journey* clearly elicited a different response compared to the other books (with text). According to Schaffer & Watters (2003: 12),

> [m]any caregivers stated they had not understood *Abongi's journey* as there were no words. More confident caregivers, usually ECD [Early Childhood Development] educators, expressed excitement about how the book could be used to stimulate storytelling and the child's imagination.

Evelyn Arizpe's (2010) international study on wordless books explores how children construct meaning from the visual images in contemporary wordless picture books. In 2010, the study had been running concurrently in the UK, Spain, Australia and the US for 2 years, and each research team had been working with groups of 10-12-year-old children. Most of the children belong to minority ethnic communities and had recently migrated to these countries, either as children of refugees, asylum seekers, or migrant workers. Arizpe (2010) writes that the project built on the experiences and knowledge that children bring to their reading of wordless picture books on the topics of migration, journeys and foreign worlds: "It looks at how they construct meaning using strategies that both provide analytical data and have the potential to develop their critical literacy skills. These strategies also encourage them to reflect on their own or others' experiences of migration" (Arizpe 2010).

One of the findings of interest to my own study is that, despite the fact that most of the children had little experience with picture books and were not fluent in English, they were able to engage with the wordless picture books and arrive at "sophisticated understandings of the narrative, the characters and their intentions; of the play between fantasy and reality and of the use of colour, design and layout to tell the story" (Arizpe 2010). These findings correlate, to some extent, with my own, as discussed in the research findings.

In their article, Evelyn Arizpe & Morag Styles (2008: 207-22) investigate a wide age group of children who "give voice to the pictures and the ironic spaces between word and image" (Arizpe & Styles 2008: 207). The study made use of postmodern picture books and confirmed the authors' earlier conclusions from a two-year study discussed in *Children reading pictures* (Arizpe & Styles 2003), namely that children

are able to comprehend different viewpoints, moods, messages and emotions suggested in contemporary picture books. In addition, they are able to articulate personal responses to picture books despite the fact that they still have difficulty with the written word.

The scope of this article does not allow a detailed account of the existing wordless picture books found locally; suffice it to say that, compared to an imported selection, South Africa's output of wordless books lacks diversity and leans heavily on an 'educational' label (often including a teacher's guide with a list of specific outcomes). This is not surprising, given current government attempts to alleviate illiteracy in South Africa.

It should be noted that, although illiteracy is a major part of the context I investigated, it is not the focus. Illiteracy is regarded as a barrier to cultivating a culture of reading, and I argue that wordless picture books can serve as a medium to address this by harnessing the tradition of storytelling that exists within the predominantly Xhosa-speaking community of Kayamandi. The benefits of fostering such a culture of reading would certainly create conditions that could result in improved literacy, but for the purposes of this study, my focus remains on a culture of reading as opposed to illiteracy.

2.1 The South African home as a reading environment and the publishing industry

The home as a micro-environment for learning, the role of the parents in a child's education, as well as the availability of reading material in South African homes provide insight into the lack of a local reading culture and of the literacy problems facing South Africa. Du Plessis (Van Heerden 2008) is of the opinion that the majority of South Africans view reading and books as synonymous with an academic exercise or an obligation. Parents who do not have a reading culture of their own often perceive reading only in relation to its educational purposes (Tiemensma 2008: 61). Low levels of awareness regarding the value of reading for personal and career development result in many children not experiencing parent-child joint reading before starting school. High levels of illiteracy and a shortage of context-specific reading materials in indigenous languages also mean that reading for

pleasure is less likely to be a habitual practice in South African homes (Van Heerden 2008).

Books labelled as 'educational' can, of course, also be used in the home and for joint reading. I must, however, agree with Van Heerden's (2008) opinion that, by relying on (wordless) books that are produced in a 'strictly educational' fashion, we risk losing the magic of creating work that can be read purely for pleasure and perpetuate the current view that reading and story creation are purely educational.

At this point, it is important to note a distinct difference between reading for pleasure and reading for educational purposes. Xolisa Guzula (2011) of the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa emphasises the importance of storytelling as entertainment for children, and considers it an extremely efficient tool for learning: children tend to learn more through enjoyment.[10] When children are told stories, they enter their own fantasy world, which makes stories a powerful form of entertainment and learning.

Despite growing support for literacy development in a mother tongue, local markets are still dominated by English and Afrikaans picture books for children. Dismal sales and financial constraints on libraries are among the reasons why publishers hesitate to produce children's books purely for enjoyment in African languages. Authors and illustrators are exposed to risks involving the uncertainty regarding the profitable production of books that address the many different cultures and avoid stereotyping and the alienation of the readers they try to reach, especially considering South Africa's eleven official languages (Johnson 2009: 12). The economic constraints of South African families also hinder sales, as many simply cannot afford books meant for entertainment.

2.2 Joint reading

Studies show that, when parents engage in joint reading with their children, it contributes not only to the child's development, but also to a perceived improvement in parenting capabilities (Seden 2007: 137). A parent who is illiterate, or whose literacy level is low, may be intimidated, or feel unable to make sense of the print that

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10   E-mail communication with X Guzela, 2 October 2011.

accompanies many locally produced children's books. However, when reading is simply defined as an active, constructive, *meaning-making process* (Colorado State University 2011), one can conclude that it need not begin with printed text. Radebe (Morris 2007: 33) believes that, through the use of picture books, the illiterate parent is able to create a narrative via the contextual clues of the visual story. Wordless picture books connect visual literacy, cultural literacy and literacy with print and, through these linkages, support the development of literacy skills (Jalongo *et al* 2002: 167).

2.3   Wordless books as motivating a culture of reading

Stewig (Dowhower 1997: 65) is of the opinion that the wordless genre can serve as a motivating factor for readers, mainly due to the visually oriented nature of children in this day and age. Wordless books do not require the reader to decode words and, as such, can be considered to be more accessible, in particular to readers with low literacy levels.

Children and adults alike enjoy the opportunity to become 'authors' by providing the 'text' to go with the images in order to create multiple narratives. The process of storytelling linked to these books provides a powerful framework for understanding text, being tied to children's own inner "storying", which they use to make sense of their social world (Fang 1999: 18). 'Storying' has important implications when linked to the rich tradition of storytelling, which forms part of many South African cultures, and has the potential to create an increasingly positive attitude towards reading, regardless of literacy levels. With joint reading, the physical response evoked by listening is also combined with the warmth and safety provided by the presence of the parent, creating a pleasant association with voluntary reading (Greene 1988: 2).

3.   Research methodology

Participative intervention research was conducted up to the fourth stage of the six-stage intervention research model, that is the early development and pilot-testing phase (De Vos *et al* 2011: 473-90). The preceding stages are problem analysis and project planning, information gathering and synthesis, and design. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by Stellenbosch University's Ethical

Committee. The Ikhaya Trust Centre's management also granted the necessary permission for the research to be conducted.[11]

Purposive sampling was used to source the participants from the Ikhaya Trust Centre in Kayamandi. The population consisted of children enrolled in a programme at the Centre, and their parents / primary caregivers. The children were sampled on the basis of age and had to be between six and nine years old. The unit of analysis for the study consisted of a group comprising one parent / primary caregiver and one child. The programme was implemented in August 2011 and participants participated in one reading session a week. During these sessions, individual parent / caregiver-child groups were invited to spend time reading a wordless picture book together. Four wordless picture books were read.

Qualitative data were gathered from the 20 participants using two semi-structured interviews. After each reading session, participant groups would be interviewed regarding the book(s) they had just read. The first interview investigated the participants' perception of the visual narrative, enjoyment of the genre and experience of the reading situation. The second interview was held at the end of the reading programme, and aimed to determine the participants' perception of the overall programme. They were asked to give an overall opinion of the four wordless picture books, and to elaborate on their experience with them in the reading situation. This interview was consequently also used as a debriefing tool. Both the parent/caregiver and the child were present for the interview, and input was received from both participants.

The following dominant themes emerged during the analysis of the interview data: reading pictures and relevant content; storytelling; utilisation of illustrations (pointing versus narrative formation); wordless picture books and picture books with words; thinking for oneself; reading for pleasure; and an activity in the home.

11　Participants volunteered to take part in the study after an information session was held at the Ikhaya Trust Centre. Upon volunteering for the research, the parent/primary caregiver was required to sign an informed consent form, giving written permission for both themselves and their child to participate in the study. The children were also asked to sign assent forms.

4.   Discussion of themes

4.1   Reading pictures and relevant content

The participants' reactions to the use of only pictures without text with which to create a narrative were mostly positive. The majority of the participants found the books easy to use and the illustrations easy to follow. The pictures provided clues to the setting of the stories, and a great deal of information was gathered from the facial expressions and gestures of the characters. In their interpretation of the illustrations, participants noted semiotic conventions that communicate mood and atmosphere, such as choice of media and colour. The majority of the adult participants were surprised by the vocabulary their children employed while talking about the images, as well as the detail they noted in the images. One mother, in particular, insisted that her six-year-old child repeat the story to me and stated that she had no idea that her daughter could create a story like that on her own.

In instances where books were experienced as difficult to read, participants indicated that they had found the images confusing. They found it difficult to link preceding images to subsequent ones, and were of the opinion that parts of the story were missing. No single book stood out as 'difficult', and different individuals experienced difficulties with different books.

In the absence of words, these books relied on the illustrations to convey information that the authors did not provide to the readers in writing (Nodelman 1988: 186-7). The above reactions indicate the importance of constructing images that do not confuse readers, especially in the case of wordless books meant for independent use in the home. This clearly demonstrates Nodelman's (1988: 186-7) opinion that wordless picture books require the reader to recognise that the book presents a problem to be solved. A noteworthy aspect is that, as they interacted with the books and became familiar with the genre, the readers became more comfortable with creating stories and expressed more enjoyment of the books.

The books used in the reading programme all had covers and title pages which contained text, despite the content being wordless. How these paratextual elements impacted on the reader's expectations of

the books were demonstrated in some of the reactions to, in particular, the end papers of the books.

During a few of the interviews, the parents noted that their children had started the reading process by looking at the end pages. The end papers in *Wave* (Lee 2008) are used to introduce the reader to the topic of the book, consisting of water-like, blue texture, with drawings of shells. Many of the participants noticed the shells on the end pages, and noted them in our interviews. One mother elaborated, saying that her son had identified the shells, and knew that they were found on a beach, and so concluded that the story had something to do with the ocean. In *My mother's mat* (Le Roux 2011), repeated elements of autumn leaves and trees on the end pages give an indication of the time in which the story is set, and create a more dramatic predicament for the main character, a little girl who is lost, alone in a city with which she is unfamiliar. One mother told me that her daughter had interpreted these as "dead leaves", saying that it must be winter in the book. After reading the book, and revisiting the end pages, she mentioned that she thinks the leaves had something to do with the main character's mother. Incidentally, the mother in the story passes away.

The cover of *Iphi ibola* (Le Roux 2011) also proved helpful to many of the readers in establishing the topic of the book. The parents and children who were able to read the title (available in both Xhosa and English on the cover) were able to discuss what they thought they might find in the book before proceeding to read it. On the cover of *Wave* (Lee 2008), the title text is written in blue, flowing letters, much like the movement of a wave in the ocean. Although the participants did not overtly notice this, such elements are often incorporated to anchor the meaning of a text.

On further examination of the books which the readers found more difficult to use, a common theme that surfaced was unfamiliarity with the content of the book. Comparing *Iphi ibola?* with *My mother's mat* (Le Roux 2011), one parent-child group explained to me that they made more connections with the latter than the former. The mother noted:

> For this one [*My mother's mat*], it was easier because she had connections. But the soccer book was difficult for her. I had to ask questions every time, but here she could say something about

> everything. It reminds her of the Eastern Cape. At home we've got those, the *rondavels*. So, it's like at home. There is also a lot of livestock. So she said these are her grandfather's sheep.

Bal's (1997: 118) theories regarding the "extra-textual" situation were clearly visible in this instance, as the readers' knowledge of the content, or of certain characteristics, contributed significantly to the meaning they derived from the illustrations. Project Literacy (Johnson 2009: 14) believes that readers more easily understand a text if the content is relevant and familiar to their own life experiences. Reactions encountered in my own research in support of this view included statements such as "I think this one is the things that she is used to, like the wire car".

Morris (2009: 42) argues that visual literacy is of significance in the development of a reading culture in South Africa, but that notions of literacy should include its social context in order that a child may develop a meaningful relationship with reading and writing. This was also reflected in the participants' selection of a favourite book during the programme. The reasons they offered for choosing a specific book had more to do with how they related the content to their personal context, rather than the enjoyment of the illustrations themselves. At this point, I want to establish that the 'cost' of the books played no part in indicating which books were enjoyed most. Readers were more interested in the content than the physical appearance of the books, many favouring the small, saddle-stitched paper book to a hardcover one.

4.2 Storytelling

All the participants enjoyed the storytelling aspect most during the reading sessions. Although they expressed an appreciation for the illustrations and colour, they were more attracted in creating their own narrative. Factors that contributed to their enjoyment were also related to the joint reading process itself, resembling Seden's (2007: 137-8) description of joint reading as an activity promoting emotional closeness, empathetic responsiveness and secure attachment. Storytelling proved to be a powerful communication and meaning-making tool between adult and child participants. One mother told me that her son really enjoyed the storytelling, even when he was a little

confused about the narrative. She mentioned that he was laughing and positive during the sessions and communicated well with her through stories, whereas he is often withdrawn and quiet when she asks him about his day at school. Statements such as "I like it. I would like to learn more. I am learning more about her [her daughter] too" and "we [were] working together to tell a story" indicate that the storytelling facilitated a dialogue between parent/caregiver and child which extended beyond the content of the book.

Narratives that were created also differed from group to group. Each group interpreted the illustrations differently, often to the extent that the narratives of the parent/caregiver and the child differed during a session. After reading *Wave* (Lee 2008), a mother noted that

> ... she [her daughter] would see other things ... talking more about the waves ... to me it was more the seagulls telling her what to do. She was telling a story different to ... mine.

The role of the main storyteller during the sessions varied, changing from parent to child; in a third scenario the story was created together. Participants enjoyed both the telling of, and listening to stories. The freedom provided by the genre to the participants to create their own narratives proved particularly functional in harnessing the storytelling tradition that is so prominent in Xhosa culture. Sindiwe Magona (2011) reports that stories in the Xhosa culture are an integral part of socialisation.[12] I believe that linking the book as a facilitating object to the process of storytelling could serve to elevate the "book as a cultural good" (Christopher 2010: 114) in a community's list of priorities.

4.3 Utilisation of illustrations: pointing versus narrative formation

The manner in which the participants used the illustrations also showed two main trends. In instances where the child told most of the story during a reading session, the school-going children and some in the preschool group generally created complete narratives. The images were linked together as a series, and a story was created

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12 Magona was speaking at a public discussion held at the 2011 Open Book Festival, called Free the book: how to make South Africa a reading nation, Hiddingh Hall, University of Cape Town Hiddingh Campus, Cape Town on 22 September 2011.

that had a logical beginning, progression and end. The child often named the characters, and basic casual relationships were established between the images.

By contrast, some of the preschool children would only point to things they recognised and name them, as in Sulzby's (Dowhower 1997: 70) first category of becoming literate. In this category, readers attend to images without forming a story by labelling, pointing, commenting and following the action. In these situations, the adult participant described how she helped the child formulate a story by asking questions about the images, such as "where do you think they are going?". The response elicited from the child was then used to build further conversation. By accepting the child's comments and ideas, the parent/caregiver reinforced the child's efforts and desire to share ideas (DeBruin-Parecki 1999). When school-going children encountered a problem (such as identifying an object), the parents/caregivers were able to assist in a similar manner. This provided insight into how these books function across different developmental levels (Houp 2003: 22).

During the sessions, parents/caregivers were able to connect elements of the wordless picture books to things that were relevant in their child's life, creating a personal experience for them both during the reading session. Machado (2010: 608) states that the parents' unique insight into the character of their child gives them this advantage, compared to the reading experiences that the child may encounter in a school environment. Vygotsky's (Kravtsova 2009: 11) zone of proximal development also links with the parent's ability to guide the child during the reading process. What children currently do with the help of an adult, or a more capable peer, they will do independently in the future.

4.4 Wordless picture books and picture books with words

All the children in the reading programme had been exposed to basic picture books that contained words prior to their participation in the research. During the interviews, the discussion would often lead to a comparison between the individual's experiences with using a wordless picture book, as opposed to using picture books accompanied by text.

Both positive and negative aspects were revealed when comparing the two.

At the beginning of the programme, some of the parents mentioned that they would prefer to read a book with their children that "had some words". Two main motives for this were noted. The first was revealed mostly in situations when the illustrations had been confusing, and participants were of the opinion that some text would have clarified the illustrations to some extent. This would have enabled them to realise whether they had formed a 'correct' interpretation of the illustration. Again, this was mostly the case with books that did not have contextual relevance to the reader, or a narrative that was perhaps too advanced for the preschool readers.

In the second instance, the parent was of the opinion that words were necessary so that, as one parent phrased it, "[they] can also read something". Strong emphasis was placed on the books being used as an educational tool with a developmental goal that needed to be achieved. This reaction draws attention to the earlier discussion on how reading is perceived as a purely educational activity, rather than something done for enjoyment.

The reading sessions created the first occasion for the adult participants to share a wordless picture book with a child. In participant groups for whom reading as an activity was practised at home, the books they read were always accompanied by text. One mother told me that she had seen wordless books previously, but was under the impression that they were "just for babies". The misconception that a wordless picture book could not be read with older children was a recurring theme in the vast majority of the groups.

Positive reactions to the wordless books were, to a large extent, language based. The participants were able to tell stories in the language with which they were comfortable and, as with the creation of a story, participants were able to assist each other with the translation of words of which they were unsure. Both adult and child were involved in assisting one another with translating words from English to Xhosa and vice versa. One specific caregiver-child group mentioned that the absence of words made it easier for them to tell the story. In this group, the grandmother spoke Xhosa and English, whereas her granddaughter was being educated in an Afrikaans school. She stated that they were

able to tell stories in all three languages without worrying about how the text needed to be decoded. This is reminiscent of Arizpe's (2010) study, in that the participants were able to engage with the wordless books, and create a narrative, despite certain language barriers.

Statements such as "for example, there are people who cannot read [Xhosa], but they can speak it, they can see the pictures and tell the stories with their kids" confirmed that some parents were of the opinion that these books would be useful to illiterate parents in the community. Certain parents did not hesitate to read the books with their children. The absence of words allowed parents to interact with the book without being intimidated by words that they could not read. One mother explained: "[it was] easier [for me] with the books without words, because sometimes you get these big words that I cannot pronounce".

Many of the adults attached importance to the visual literacy displayed by their children during the reading sessions. Signs such as the MTN sign in *Abongi's journey*, and the child's recognition, linkages and interpretation of these were highlighted often during the interviews. Parents were impressed with the connotations that their children were able to make with the signs in the illustrations, and were also able to add elements from their own backgrounds to their child's interpretation.

4.5 Thinking for oneself

This was undoubtedly the most dominant theme identified by the adult participants during the interviews. All of the participants were of the opinion that the lack of words in the picture books forced their children to think for themselves. One mother explained that the books made her daughter

> ... open her mind wider, because everything comes from her ... It's different from reading to tell exactly what is going on. So for me it was very nice for her to create the stories on her own from the pictures. I never knew she could do that.

There was a definite emphasis on the freedom that these books provided to the children to express their own ideas and solve problems in their own manner. Many of the parents expressed the view that, when using books with words, they often perceived that their children

would memorise the text on the page and simply repeat it when reading through the book. Although this is an important part of literacy development, the parents enjoyed the fact that the wordless books allowed some spontaneity and creative thought for both themselves and the child. One mother expressed the importance of this for her: "Now I am also showing to him, you can just say what you think. Just thinking for yourself".

The wordless picture book also established itself as a medium that the children could use confidently. One mother explained how her son had decided to read to her during a session:

> ... at first I wanted to show him how the book goes, and then he said, 'No Mommy, let me give you *my* story, the way it is going, the way I am thinking'.

One of the mothers viewed this type of thinking as important for teaching children a sense of self-efficacy. "It encourage[s] the young ones to have something to say", she explained when asked why she perceived that it was important for them to use their imagination and think for themselves. Nussbaum (2010: 107) stresses the cultivation of imaginative thinking as integral to creating a society of citizens who are empowered to see beyond the stereotypes of gender, race and ethnicity. The ability of children to deal with the presence of people that differ from them, and to perceive the full humanness of people we encounter in daily life allows them to learn to deal with one another with respect, dignity and understanding (Nussbaum 2001: 69 & 2010: 107). In South Africa's multicultural society, this kind of understanding and respect is critical in fostering an understanding society.

4.6   Reading for pleasure

All parent/caregiver-child groups indicated that they enjoyed both the reading sessions and the books provided for these. I had some concern that the adult participants were merely being polite when saying this. Their descriptions of their child's excitement about attending the reading sessions, and that they were 'sad' when the final session had come, however, support their opinions. Tiemensma (2008: 62) argues that, in order to create a world of engaged readers, the affective side of reading and literacy – the enjoyment that a reader derives from

engaging with a book – requires further consideration. A large part of this enjoyment of reading, as mentioned earlier, was derived from the storytelling process. Yet, I believe that the fact that the wordless picture books facilitated this storytelling can be viewed as a means to form positive relationships with reading and books at an early age. Tiemensma (2008: 57) proposes that the cultivation of a learner's interest in books and reading could not only help overcome home disadvantages, but also be the motivating factor for addressing the lack of a reading culture in South Africa as a whole.

The theme of reading for enjoyment compared to reading for education is another element that was highlighted during my discussions with parents. I believe that the fact that the children were not expected to prove that they had learned something from the sessions added to the experience of doing something enjoyable. The parents of at least two of the school-going children mentioned the children's hesitation to engage with schoolbooks.

4.7   An activity in the home

All of the participants were of the opinion that this was an activity they could continue in their homes, provided they had access to wordless picture books. The majority believed that they would be able to make time for this kind of reading and story creation with their children. The one parent, who expressed concern about continuing such reading at home, explained that she worked long and often unpredictable hours, often leaving the house before her children were awake and returning after they had gone to bed. She did, however, mention that she would like to teach her mother (the child's grandmother) to use these kinds of books with her son at home, as she saw how much he enjoyed interacting with the books. All of the adult respondents indicated that they believed reading with their children was both beneficial and important.

None of the participants had wordless picture books in their homes. When reading as an activity was practised at home, it was usually done with schoolbooks or books with text. All parents were of the opinion that the wordless books provided an easy and manageable medium which they could make use of independently. It appeared

that the majority of the parents believed that they were contributing to their child's development through the joint reading sessions.

5.   Conclusion

The reading programme was concluded at the end of August 2011, with feedback from participants being predominantly positive. The research findings indicate that wordless picture books can be used as an effective intervention for fostering a culture of reading by facilitating joint parent-child reading practices and by allowing for the activity to be carried out in the home. The stories created through the interpretation of the illustrations were not only diverse and adapted to the reader's social context, but also offered a source of enjoyment for both the parent and the child. The illustrations facilitated dialogue and a shared co-construction of knowledge by participants, as they were able to assist each other in creating stories from shared understandings. The different uses of these books, ranging from pointing and labelling to the creation of a complete narrative, indicate their ability to cater for different levels of development, and show how they can be used by parents to encourage children to share ideas and opinions. The wordless picture books allowed both the parent and the child to be the primary narrator, and gave both an opportunity to play the role of storyteller or listener. The books appear to be a useful medium for facilitating the storytelling process, as the illustrations provide a starting point, but do not limit the readers to a specific, set story. Findings also indicate the importance of relevant and local content in these books, as readers related better to images that were familiar or could be recognised in their everyday surroundings.

Although there was some emphasis on the potential educational value of these books, the participants all enjoyed the spontaneity and creative freedom that the medium had to offer and there was very little emphasis on 'getting the story right'. It appears that, should access to such books be available, it would provide an activity that could easily be practised independently by the participants in their own homes. On the basis of the results of this study, I am convinced that wordless picture books as a means to spark storytelling can also be harnessed

as a tool to address negative connotations with books and the lack of a reading culture in South Africa.

It should be noted that the scale of this study was small, yet focused. As such, the findings cannot be generalised to a larger population. Jay Heale (2011) of *Bookchat* raises the question as to why we, in a country that has 11 official languages, are not producing more wordless books that can be 'read' in any language.[13] The wordless picture books currently available in South Africa are limited and generally labelled as educational. I believe that this medium warrants more attention from local publishers who are interested in cultivating a love of reading. Maskew Miller Longman's (2007) *Stars of Africa* series has already taken a step in this direction by publishing their wordless stories series, despite its classification in a wider educational series.

The creation of wordless picture books that are not strictly meant for educational purposes would also provide local authors and illustrators with an opportunity to create local content in a manner that is not limited by a specific style or outcome. I believe that the medium warrants further investigation within the South African context.

13   E-mail communication with J Heale, 28 August 2011.

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