

Reading deeply

Interpreting literary texts in primary and intermediate school classrooms

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KEY POINTS

Teachers can help students to build their interpretive capabilities by:

- working with students as an interpretive community
- collecting interpretive puzzles of importance to the literary community
- forming and testing hypotheses
- sharing new knowledge claims with the wider community.

In this article, I describe the challenges students faced in interpreting literary—or fictional—texts in the National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement in the English learning area. I explain why it is important for students to learn how to interpret literary texts at school and consider why they might struggle with this important skill. I then describe how teachers might help students to build their interpretive capabilities.

Acts of reading deeply, like the acts of cultivating, nurturing, and tending that are part of gardening, generate knowledge that transcends the acts themselves. (Sumara, 2002a, p. xii)

This article focuses on the abilities of primary and intermediate school students in Aotearoa New Zealand to “read deeply” to interpret literary (fictional) texts. Findings from the National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA)¹ in the English learning² area suggest that students find interpretation challenging. In this article, I provide a brief overview of the NMSSA in the English learning area and the interpretive challenges students experienced in the NMSSA assessment tasks. I illustrate these challenges through a close analysis of student responses to one of the tasks. I then consider how teachers might support students to develop their abilities to interpret literary texts. But first I explain why it is important for students to develop interpretive capabilities.

Why should students learn to interpret literary texts?

Underpinning this discussion is the assumption that it is important for students to learn how to interpret literary texts while at school. But *why* is it important? There are personal and citizenship reasons, as well as academic ones. I will start with the academic reasons, which relate to teaching the disciplinary—or curriculum—literacies³ of the English learning area.

To develop the curriculum literacies of the English learning area

One of the tasks of a teacher is to apprentice students into disciplinary ways of working associated with the learning areas they teach using age-appropriate texts and tasks, and teaching in age-appropriate ways. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) describes how:

Each learning area has its own language or languages. As students discover how to use them, they find they

are able to think in different ways, access new areas of knowledge, and see the world from new perspectives. For each area, students need specific help from their teachers as they learn:

- The specialist vocabulary associated with that area;
- How to read and understand its texts;
- How to communicate knowledge and ideas in appropriate ways;
- How to listen and read critically, assessing the value of what they hear and read. (p. 16)

According to Moje (2008, 2015), apprenticing students into the disciplinary ways of working involves engaging students in problem-based and text-based learning that is consistent with work in the discipline concerned. We can learn more about how experts make meaning of texts by looking at expert–novice studies⁴ within the discipline of English (see, for example, Dorfman, 1996; Graves & Frederiksen, 1991; Peskin, 1998; Rainey, 2016; Reynolds & Rush, 2017; Zeitz, 1994.) These studies demonstrate the ways in which literary critics read texts, as compared with non-expert, novice, or everyday readers. The expert–novice studies show that there are distinct ways of working that are shared by literary critics—regardless of their different theoretical orientations. One of the main findings from these studies relates to the purposes for reading. For literary critics, one of the main purposes for reading is interpretation. Interpretation is a form of disciplinary inquiry that involves finding or responding to interpretive puzzles, forming hypotheses based on textual evidence, adjusting these hypotheses in the face of new evidence, making original knowledge claims, and sharing these claims with the wider disciplinary community.

However, developing disciplinary or curriculum literacies is not the only reason it is important for students to have opportunities to learn to interpret, rather than simply comprehend, text. A second reason is that interpretation enables understanding, imagination, and insight.

To experience understanding, imagination, and insight

Most students will not become literary critics—just as most will not become mathematicians, historians, social scientists, or physicists. However, there is another important reason for students to learn how to interpret literary texts. This reason is, I think, best described in a book written by Dennis Sumara quite some time ago now. It is called *Why Teaching Literature in School Still Matters: Imagination, interpretation, insight* (Sumara, 2002a). In this book, and related articles (see, for example, Sumara, 2002b; Sumara et al., 2008), Sumara argues that it is only through engaging deeply with text that we develop understanding, imagination, and the possibility of deep insight into our experiences and how these are influenced by context. These deep reading practices, he argues, are not common sense. They must be learnt. This, he argues, is why teaching literature in school still matters.

How well do New Zealand students interpret literary texts?

In 2019, the NMSSA in English focused on the two English strands in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007)—Making Meaning and Creating Meaning. The findings discussed in this article come from the assessment tasks in the first of these two strands. The making meaning assessments focused on students' interpretation of fiction and creative non-fiction in a range of language modes (such as excerpts from novels, short stories, memoirs, plays, poems, picture books, movies, and podcasts).

Most of the meaning-making tasks required students to answer a question or respond to a prompt and to support their response with evidence from the texts they read, listened to, or viewed. Two examples of the questions asked are shown below:

The writer wants his readers to think more deeply about the environment. Do you think he has achieved this? Use your opinions and evidence from the text to support your answer.

What kind of person is the woman with the green eyes and the red hair? What do you see that shows you this?

In most instances, students were asked to read the task and respond in writing. A smaller number of students responded to the tasks orally in conversations with teacher assessors.

Findings from the NMSSA suggest that, in general, students in Aotearoa New Zealand struggle to interpret literary text. We found that many students were able to express an opinion, and to form an hypothesis, prediction,

or evaluation that could be supported by evidence from the text. However, only a small proportion of students referred to that evidence in their responses, even when they were explicitly asked to do so. And only a very small proportion of these students were able to identify any limitations in the evidence they cited, identify competing evidence, or consider alternative interpretations. This finding is illustrated in the following example of a question where the student responses were expressed orally in the context of a conversation with a teacher assessor.

An example from the reading assessment for Year 8 students

One of the Year 8 reading assessment tasks (EARU & NZCER (2021) asked the students to read a narrative excerpt describing a pig hunt. The main character, Jonasi, had been looking forward to going pig hunting. He expresses his disappointment about being left behind, and his resentment that other boys he considers less able than himself are allowed to go. The text is written from Jonasi's point of view and there is not enough information in the extract to determine how reliable his point of view is. The excerpt does not provide the reader with any information about why Jonasi has been left behind, only that he thinks it is unfair. In an interview with a teacher assessor, students were asked to respond orally to the question: "How do you feel about what has happened to Jonasi? Explain why you feel this. Use your opinions and evidence from the text to support your answer."

Student responses could score a 0, 1, or 2. Students scored 0 if they described how they felt but did not provide evidence from the text to support their answer; for example, "I felt really sorry for him". Students scored 1 if they provided evidence from the text to support their opinion but did not acknowledge that the reader has limited information from only one character's perspective. For example:

Oh, that's just sad. Like, it's sad because he's been waiting for his whole life and his little brother got to go instead of him. And he tried to run up to them, and he did, but they just pushed him back with the other people. And like it says [in the text] they pushed him back. And he'd been dreaming of it his whole life. And he'd [have to] watch them eating it. And he'd have to share the leftovers with all the children. Yeah.

Students scored 2 if they provided evidence from the text to support their opinion, while also acknowledging that there could be a different explanation for what happened. For example:

Furious. That's not fair. But I'm also not sure, cos he's not like talking about why. Like is he big enough to throw his own spear? Is he big enough to carry his own stuff? Maybe he is? Maybe, or maybe they [the adults] had the reason, like

he was worse at throwing spears than the other kid, or he was smaller than the other kid? [So that wasn't clear in the text?] Yeah.

I have mixed feelings. I feel like he should have been taken, especially as there were those that were weaker than him and younger than him. I'm not sure how you say his name—Eitika, his arm was apparently so weak he couldn't hit a canoe at ten paces. But apparently, Jonasi could. So, there might have been something. That maybe he wasn't there early enough. There must be something that might make the men not want to bring him. Maybe he was irresponsible. So ... I have mixed feelings—like he should have gone, but there's always a reason why they didn't take him.

Less than one-quarter of the Year 8 students (16%) scored 2, illustrating how difficult it was for them to recognise and explain an alternative explanation, given the limited information at the reader's disposal.

The example above comes from a task designed to assess students' interpretation in reading, but we found that students had similar difficulties in interpreting the oral texts they listened to, and the static and moving images they viewed.

How might we explain these findings?

One explanation for these findings is simply that interpreting literary text is hard. It is intellectually challenging, time-consuming work that requires close reading, critical and creative thinking, perspective taking, and argumentation skills. Considering more than one hypothesis—that is, being able to put aside one hypothesis for long enough to consider another—is especially difficult. This requires tolerating uncertainty and seeing things from different perspectives.

Another explanation is that some primary and intermediate students in Aotearoa New Zealand may not have had much practice at interpreting texts at school. Only a small proportion of Year 4 teachers (14%) and Year 8 teachers (15%) who responded to the NMSSA teacher survey said that they “very often” provided their students with opportunities to discuss different interpretations of the texts they read. A possible reason for this finding is that over the past 10 to 15 years, teacher support materials (for example, Ministry of Education, 2003, 2006, 2009), professional development initiatives (for example, Parr et al., 2007), and standardised assessment tools (for example, Elley, 2000, 2003; Darr et al., 2007) have tended to focus on processing and comprehension skills rather than on interpretation.

So, how can teachers help students to develop their interpretive capabilities? I turn to this question of pedagogy next.

How can teachers help students learn to interpret texts?

There are pedagogical approaches that teachers can develop to help students to learn the curriculum literacies of English, and to experience understanding, imagination, and insight. Four main pedagogical approaches serve both purposes: working as an interpretive literary community; collecting interpretive puzzles of importance to the literary community; forming and testing hypotheses; and sharing new knowledge claims with the wider community. In the sections below, I consider what each of these practices might look like in the context of primary and intermediate school classrooms.

Working with students as an interpretive literary community

Reading, listening to, and viewing texts are often seen as solitary activities. While literary critics do indeed spend large amounts of time analysing text alone, their task is fundamentally a social one driven by the shared interpretive goals of a wider community.

To develop interpretive skills while at school, students need opportunities to do so as part of a community with shared interpretive purposes. Teachers can establish interpretive literary communities in their classrooms and facilitate collective meaning making in a variety of ways. For example, teachers might read a book aloud or show a film to a small group or the whole class, coming together periodically to discuss individual and collective responses. They might record students' responses to the text, revisiting the text and these responses to the text over time to form and refine interpretive claims.

This is an approach that Sumara (2002a) argues helps students to see the contingent nature of ideas, and of our sense of ourselves. He argues that shared reading of literary fiction can alter personal and collective interpretations. He also argues that shared reading practices can create the possibilities for reflection on, and revision of, personal narratives.

Collecting interpretive puzzles of importance to the literary community

For literary critics, literary inquiry often begins by finding an interpretive puzzle in or about the text. Interpretive puzzles do not have a definitive or “right” solution—just more or less plausible or viable answers based on the available evidence and the context of inquiry. Interpretive puzzles might be found by “seeking patterns”, or “identifying strangeness, surprise or confusion” (Rainey, 2016, p. 59) in or across texts. Interpretive problems might also be drawn from existing literary criticism.

As teachers will be aware, even very young students naturally puzzle over, wonder about, or question the texts they listen to, view, or read. This is especially true of fictional texts that tend to contain more indeterminacies or ambiguities than non-fiction. Students need the space to find and explore puzzles that are important to them and their peers; that is, puzzles that build new knowledge (at least for the group involved), take them further, and help them see the text, themselves, or the world in new ways. It is the job of the teacher to make this space, to listen out for students' wonderings, and to help students to recognise, value, and frame these wonderings as puzzles worthy of exploration. The teacher may also pose a puzzle about a text shared with students. However, if the teacher poses the puzzle, it is essential that they do not have a predetermined or preferred answer. In other words, the puzzle must genuinely puzzle the teacher. While the teacher may initially take a leading role in puzzle finding, the end goal is to enable students to find and express their own puzzles.

Puzzles do not always present themselves straight away. They take time to emerge. And puzzles are not always fully formed when they are first posed. They are likely to change over time. So, students may need help keeping track of the different puzzles that emerge and the ways in which they change over time through repeated encounters with the text. Teachers can support students to do this by keeping a running list of the puzzles that emerge. These lists might have a heading such as: "Things we are wondering about", "Questions we have about the text", "Things we have noticed", or simply "Our puzzles". As new wonderings emerge, they can be added to the list, and as old puzzles are refined, they can be annotated.

A note on the complexity of puzzles found by students

As primary school teachers will be aware, the questions or puzzles young students come up with are not necessarily simple ones. They can be just as theoretically and emotionally challenging as some of the questions that adult readers have of the texts they engage with. I was involved in a research project (McDowall, 2010) with a teacher skilled at making space for the 5 year olds in her class to respond to picture books read repeatedly over time. And the puzzles they came up with were by no means simple. Indeed, some were akin to those of interest to literary critics. These puzzles related to big human questions—of fear, death, representation, and the nature of reality. For example, the students in this class spent time wondering whether the lion and the dragon in the picture book *A Lion in the Meadow* (Mahy, 1992) were real—leading to philosophical discussions about what is real and what is not, and how we know. These students

wondered about the story *Roimata's Cloak* (Tamehana, 1995) and whether Roimata's experiences on her way home from visiting her kuia really happened, were a dream, or meant that Roimata had died. This wondering led to a close analysis of the text and illustrations and to discussions about what happens when you die. One of the students in the class had recently had a death in the family, and other students had experienced the death of pets. The importance of the puzzle to the group was linked both to the world of the text and to their own worlds and identities.

Forming and testing hypotheses

Following the identification of an interpretive puzzle, literary critics generally go through a process of "recursively considering possibilities" (Rainey, 2016, p. 64) or "constant recursive hypothesising" (Reynolds & Rush, 2017, p. 205). This involves constant re-reading and looking with an open mind for further evidence to support, discredit, or alter the hypothesis under consideration. Depending on the nature of their inquiry, and on their theoretical framing, literary critics may look to a range of sources for evidence to support or discredit their hypothesis. These sources might, for example, include:

- textual features such as vocabulary, punctuation, structure, language devices
- contextual information including social, cultural, and historical aspects of the time and place in which the text was written or set
- information about the author, or other texts written by that author
- literary theories or theoretical conventions
- previously published knowledge claims and evidence by other literary critics working on related interpretive problems.⁵

Literary critics look for textual and other evidence that might discredit their hypotheses by asking and answering questions of themselves in response to new evidence emerging on each re-reading of the text. They know how to do this from years of engaging with others in disciplinary communities. It can be challenging for novices to engage in such processes on their own. For developmental reasons, this self-questioning can be even more difficult for young students. But students *can* learn to ask interpretive questions of each other and answer these questions with each other. Teachers can help students to do so by providing them with opportunities to talk about their emerging interpretations as a community of meaning makers. Through this process, teachers can model, and students can learn, the curriculum literacies of the English learning area.

Sharing new knowledge claims with the wider community

At a certain point in their thinking, literary critics will be ready to share their work with the wider disciplinary community, often in the form of an interpretive—or knowledge—claim. For literary critics, an interpretive claim could be considered a summary of where they have got to with their thinking. It is a summary that they believe will contribute to or advance knowledge or that will take the conversation in the community of experts forward. This might involve coming up with an original way of thinking about the puzzle or the text. An interpretive claim is an invitation to others to engage or re-engage with the text concerned, and to continue the interpretive conversation. The purpose of making the interpretive claim is these subsequent conversations.

In the school context, the knowledge to be shared is new in the sense that it is new to the group concerned—it is knowledge that has taken the thinking of the group forward. And in the school context, the wider community might be another group of students in the class, or students from another classroom, parents, whānau, or members of the wider community. One way that teachers can support students to make an interpretive—or knowledge—claim is by providing a structure that captures the recursive hypothesising and evolving thinking that the students have engaged in over time. This might be thought of as the equivalent of mathematicians showing their working. The structure might begin with a statement about the nature of the puzzle, and why this puzzle was important to the group. It might go on to describe the evolving thinking of the group in relation to the textual evidence. And it might end with the latest thinking of the group and a broadening out of the implications of the puzzle more generally.

To illustrate what this might look like in practice, I have worked up a hypothetical example based on the thinking observed in the classroom of the predominantly Pākehā group of 5 year olds I described earlier in this article.

Our puzzle about the story *Roimata's Cloak*

We read the story *Roimata's Cloak* by Esther Tamehana. We were puzzled about the part in the story when Roimata goes to sleep on the way home from visiting her kuia. We wondered if what happened was real, or if it was magic, or if it was a dream. Then we thought maybe Roimata had died because she forgot her kuia's warning and got caught in the mist. We thought she looked like she had died because she was lying down with her eyes closed, and all the birds were gathered around looking down at her. And the colours in the illustration were soft like the colours when someone dies. We know special people who have died—or pets. We don't know what happens when you die. Some of us think that you turn into animals when you die. Some of us think you go to heaven. Maybe Esther Tamehana thinks that when you die you fly away on a kākahu like the kererū in the story does. Or maybe she doesn't know either, so she imagined that dying is like flying away. What do you think?

This example describes an aspect of the story *Roimata's Cloak* (Tamehana, 1995) that puzzled the group of children who listened to it and discussed it over several weeks of revisiting the text. It records the various hypotheses these children came up with over time, the hypothesis they settled on as being most plausible, and the reasons for this, based on evidence from the text. The example also refers to conversations the group had that linked their own experiences of death with their interpretations of the text, and about the big question of what happens when you die. The example also documents the children's conversations about the author of the text. Importantly, it leaves a space open to pick up the conversation again in the future, or with other people, for further hypothesising. It ends by pointing to an imagined audience, wider than the immediate group of children involved in the discussion, signalling that meaning making is fundamentally a social endeavour, and that the interpretive conversation these children had together is a universally important one.

Implications for policy and research

In this article, I have focused on what teachers might do in classrooms to support students to read deeply and develop interpretive practices. I have drawn on literature on the application of findings from the expert novice studies in the secondary school classroom and on Sumara's (2002a) pedagogy of literary engagement. But teachers do not work in a vacuum. It is important that curriculum documents, curriculum support materials, in-service and pre-service education, and assessment tools for the English learning area foreground interpretation as one of the primary purposes of reading literary texts. Of late, this does not seem to have been the case in Aotearoa New Zealand—or in fact elsewhere. As Dennis Sumara (2002a, p. 33) concludes, drawing from his research on the use of literary texts in the Canadian context, texts in school tend to be treated as “closed” rather than as texts “open” to different interpretations.

There is currently little recent research on the teaching of interpretive skills in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand primary and intermediate schools. We do not know what posing interpretive problems, recursive hypothesising, and making knowledge claims look like in this context. However, we do know that New Zealand Year 4 and Year 8 students find it challenging. I hope I have made a convincing case for why this needs to change. Such research might focus on the interactions between teachers, texts, and students in different Aotearoa New Zealand contexts. And it might track the ways in which interpretations, identities, and contexts evolve over time in relation to each other.

What might we expect to see change?

If there is a greater focus on deep reading and interpretation in classrooms, primary and intermediate school students might have more agency as meaning makers. They might find their engagement with literary texts at school to be more challenging, more purposeful, more rewarding, and more fun. This has been shown to be so in New Zealand classroom-based research in secondary schools (see, for example, Locke et al., 2009). We might also begin to see positive shifts in the national monitoring data for the English learning area. We might see evidence of teachers providing students with more opportunities to interpret literary texts at school. We might see positive shifts in students' capacity to interpret such texts. And, in time, we might see the emergence of a new generation of literary critics and a new generation of citizens with the capacity not only to comprehend text, but also to experience understanding, imagination, and insight.

Notes

1. The NMSSA is carried out by the Educational Assessment Research Unit (EARU) and the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) for the Ministry of Education. The NMSSA is designed to assess student achievement across the New Zealand curriculum at Year 4 and Year 8 in New Zealand English-medium state and state-integrated schools. Every year, nationally representative samples of students from 100 schools at each of these year levels are assessed in one or more learning areas.
2. In 2019, the NMSSA assessed achievement and opportunities to learn in the English learning area (Educational Assessment Research Unit [EARU] & New Zealand Council for Educational Research [NZCER], 2020).
3. In the research literature, different terms are used to describe the literacies specific to particular learning areas, including "disciplinary literacy" (Moje, 2008) and "curriculum literacies" (Wyatt-Smith et al., 1999).
4. Expert–novice studies explore the ways of working specific to the disciplines by comparing the ways in which experts in the discipline concerned (as compared with novices) create and communicate new knowledge.
5. More detail on these practices can be found in Rainey (2016) and Reynolds and Rush (2017).

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