An Exploratory Study into Empowering Grade 10 and 11 Learners through Critical Engagement with South African Literature: A Case Study in Cato Manor

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY INTO EMPOWERING GRADE 10 AND 11 LEARNERS THROUGH CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE: A CASE STUDY IN CATO MANOR

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In gratitude,
Sally Fales
Abstract

This qualitative research project explores how critical engagement with Black South-African authored literature empowers the voices of grade 10 and 11 students in the Cato Manor township of South Africa. Located within a Freirean educational framework, this research utilizes a critical pedagogy approach to empower student voices through representation in texts, deconstruction of a knowledge hierarchy, problem-posing pedagogy, and exposure to themes of racial pride and self-agency in selected literature. This study employs a general qualitative design paradigm consisting of engagement with 3 focus groups of 10-11 learners spanning grades 10 and 11 in Cato Manor public secondary schools. The researcher utilizes participatory observation and facilitation to implement self-created lesson plans of reading and discussing chosen texts with the learners. This data concludes that through empowering book selections and intentional culture creation, students use relatable literature to vulnerably express challenges faced in the township, critically debate philosophical themes, and experience encouragement through dialogue of texts. This research advocates for greater access to Black South African authored literature for adolescence to increase benefits seen in critical thinking, connection to peers, and self-confidence.
**Introduction**

Despite South Africa becoming a democracy nearly 30 years ago (1994), the ghosts of apartheid practices and policies continue to haunt the nation and maintain racial inequalities. National Party leaders manipulated schools, environments with the potential to inspire and encourage future leaders, to become sites of racialized social reproduction and factories to produce semi-skilled workers for a white-beneficiary economic system. Fearing the power of literature to conscientize the oppressed population, the apartheid government restricted Black South African access to school and community libraries. Despite Black advocacy for greater access to literature, libraries and books still remains disproportionately accessible to predominately middle-class citizens who are still largely White.

Compounded by the enduring effects of historical inequality, South Africa fails to provide successful literacy curriculum for its students. Every few years, the nation makes headlines around the world when they publish reports of literacy ability and reading comprehension rates among youth. As a result of continuously declining literacy rates in South Africa, a plethora of research has emerged with experimental methods and recommendations for increasing literacy ability among learners. Significantly, the emphasis on reading within South African educational research predominately values books as a critical resource to increase literacy. In addition to the literacy crisis, Black South African students in low-income environments battle high rates of violence, drug and alcohol abuse, disease, and unemployment. Each of these factors contribute to low self-esteem and hopelessness (Cox et al., 2016, p. 13). This research study looks beyond using literature as a solution to the nation’s literacy crisis to understand how literature can be used to empower learners who face a multiplicity of challenges and inequalities.
The researcher sought to understand the meaningful ways in which secondary school learners in Cato Mano interpret and engage with selected texts. The texts selected intentionally share uplifting themes such as pride in African identity and designing one’s future. Through collective critical literary dialogue, the researcher facilitated and observed the impact of the readings on participants. To collect this data, the researcher hosted six focus groups conducted as book club-style session with grade 10 and 11 secondary school learners in Cato Manor. Throughout the focus group session, the researcher recorded how learners engaged with the texts, noting when and how participants questioned the texts, reflected on personal ideology, and reformed ideas or feelings as a result of the content in the readings. The objective of this study was to explore how literature can be used as an empowering tool to encourage students to see power and value in their voices. Through literary intervention, this research supported students in seeing their potential and restoring hope to a community of adolescents plagued with sociological challenges.

This report consists of 6 sections. The first section is a comprehensive literature review. The literature review outlines the Freirean theoretical framework adopted in the study and defines key terms including empowerment, critical reading, and emancipatory learning. In addition, it addresses how such theories can be applied to a South African context. Next, the researcher reviews previous literature that supports the claim that books are an empowering tool. The literature review contextualizes both the history and present-day system of education in South Africa. Further, the research explores and reiterates calls for the promotion of a national culture of reading. Finally, a brief historical overview of the Cato Manor community is provided before looking at current day challenges that youth face in the township.
The second section outlines the methodology utilized in this research study. The researcher developed a generic qualitative research design, and the section outlines the specific research and analysis methods employed. Moreover, ethical considerations in working with the respondents, and trustworthiness are thoroughly explained.

The third section recognizes limitations of the study and any problems of potential or actual bias. The researcher transparently discusses her identity as a white American student, and practical shortcomings in this study such as a short-time frame and lack of academic diversity in the sample population.

The fourth section presents and analyzes the data from the focus groups. This section is broken down into the multiple praxis approach to empowerment utilized by the researcher, including an empowering transformative learning environment, representative literature, critical engagement, and content of the literature itself. The researcher analyzes changes in thought and response by learners as a result of reading and discussing topics in the text including African identity and anxieties surrounding the future. The data analysis section concludes with discussing the learner’s reported outcomes and benefits of the exploratory focus groups.

The fifth section consists of concluding remarks by the researcher to summarize the data collection and analysis and propose areas for future research. The researcher makes a final argument for the importance of this study and how to move forward with the knowledge obtained.

Finally, the appendix section includes a complete set of selected texts, focus group facilitator notes, annotated literature used to guide the focus groups, and more. To acquire the greatest understanding of the data and outcomes of the study, it is imperative readers browse the texts utilized. The researcher recommends readers familiarize themselves with the selected
poetry and additional data prior to reading the data analysis section to best appreciate the learner’s literary interpretations during focus groups.
Literature Review

Global historical events reveal a pattern of oppressors limiting access to education for those oppressed, proving education’s strong association with progress and emancipation. Examples include anti-literacy laws in the United States in the 1800s, Germany’s quota-system limiting the number of Jewish students’ in public schools in the early 1900s, and the Apartheid government’s control of schools for Black South Africans in the late 1900s. Since Paulo Freire’s groundbreaking work in the field of educational research (1970), much published literature is focused on education as a path to emancipation for those oppressed or discriminated against in society. This literature review situates itself within research that recognizes education as an empowering tool in the face of present day and historical oppression and discrimination.

One common measure of education is literacy ability. Educational literature repeatedly reveals literacy’s link to improved outcomes in academic achievement and financial upward mobility. Given the importance of literacy ability, educational literature often focuses on finding the best way to teach learners to read, write, and increase comprehension skills. Despite an abundance of research on teaching literacy, global literacy rates reveal nations around the world continue to struggle to teach children to read. South Africa made headlines across the world when the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study exposed that nearly 80% of 4th grade learners could not read for meaning. As a result, scholarship on reading in South Africa remains predominately focused on its relation to literacy and standardized academic achievement. However, in recent years, researchers are exploring the more holistic benefits of reading and its role in empowerment and emancipation for learners. Impoverished South African youth battle high rates of violence, unemployment, and HIV/AIDS (Gray, 2017). Given the impacts of poverty on low self-esteem and self-confidence, the need for an empowering
curriculum is reinforced. One such community experiencing the consequences of these sociologically based problems on the outskirts of central Durban is the township of Cato Manor.

This review will discuss literature that defines and grounds the claim that critical reading can be a tool for empowerment, utilizing prior research that explores benefits of reading outside of literacy achievement within a South African context.

**Theoretical Framework: Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Learning**

Paulo Freire’s foundational research focuses on the transformative and developmental aspects of education (Freire, 2005). His seminal work, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1968) describes a process of teaching literacy that supports learners process in coming to a new awareness of selfhood, society, and to inspire citizens to transform the society that denies them full participation (Freire, 2005, p. 30). Freire recognizes education as the key to liberation by the oppressed (Combaz, et al., 2014). Amidst his many groundbreaking publications and educational theories, is “The Importance of the Act of Reading” (1983) which has influenced literacy curriculum since its publication. While the act of reading is widely celebrated for its linkage to concrete academic progress, it is also a fundamental tool in the act of ‘conscientizo.’ A Freirean term, ‘conscientizo’ refers to the educational process aimed at empowering populations whose dialect, race, work and culture has been repeatedly demeaned by systems of oppression (Dawson et al, 2018, p. 116).

Freire describes the act of reading literary texts a “a part of a wider process of human development and growth based on understanding both one’s own experience and the social world” (Freire, 1983, p. 5). This type of reading is referred to by academics as critical reading. Critical reading is defined as “engaging in dialogue with texts – both listening to the voices of
the text and responding to them” (Wilson et al., 2004, p. 1). The ideas, opinions, or judgements provided in a text should be used to further one’s own ideas, opinions, and judgements. The interplay between the physical world and the written word informs Paulo Freire’s theory on the transformative impacts of reading for students.

Freire rejects the monotonous practice of reading as scanning and mechanically spelling out the words on a page, or simply memorizing syntactical rules (Freire, 1983, p. 8-11). Rather, Freire argues books should be used as dynamic and living tools to feed students’ curiosity. He advocates that literacy programs must come from the ‘word universe’ of the learners, built on contextually relevant anxieties, fears, demands and dreams of the learning population (Freire, 1983, p. 11). More bluntly, literacy workshops and programs must be centered around the experiences, voices, and interpretations of the learners, not the teachers or curriculum-builders.

Building off of Freire’s mission of conscientizo, educational sociologist Mezirow discusses the phenomenon of critical ethnography. Critical ethnography is a term coined to describe the phenomenon of reproduction of societal inequalities through the schooling system (Dawson, 2018, p. 116). To combat the process of critical ethnography, Mezirow advocates for incorporating emancipatory knowledge in education. Emancipatory knowledge tasks educators with seeing learning as a production of cultural practices that can offer students a sense of identity, place, and hope. The key to providing emancipatory knowledge is supported by Mezirow’s steps to cultivate transformative learning. Transformative learning is the cycle of learning and reflection that results in the constant modifying or cementing of old views that can directly impact learners’ future experiences. Transformative learning reinforces Freire’s critical reading that advocates for students to interpret the written word through the lens of their unique experience in the world. Outside of liberating the curriculum, transformative learning relies on
disrupting the traditional teacher-learner relationship. In-depth dialogue between student and teacher creates a horizontal relationship, encouraging student discovery and individual agency (Dawson et al., 2018, p. 119).

It is necessary to recognize the previous theories come predominately from Western and South American thinkers, and therefore cannot be blanketly applied to a developing African context. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate how such theories translate to the South African historical and present-day context. Emerging at the same time as Freire’s theories, is Steve Biko’s founding of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). The Black Consciousness Movement sought to embolden youth and redefine ‘Black’ as a positive and empowering identity (Hadfield, 2017). Adopting Freire’s idea of ‘conscientizo,’ Biko and the BCM believed that if ‘conscientized’ to recognize their own self-worth and potential, Black South Africans could unite for physical liberation and mental liberation from the socialized messages of white superiority and Black inferiority (Hadfield, 2017).

South African researchers Vaughn and Cox evaluated the effectiveness and relevance of applying the process of transformative learning in a South African context. Understanding the context of high unemployment among youth, political volatility, substance abuse, crime, and fractured families, Cox and Vaughn held transformative reading groups with young South African adults (Cox et al., 2016, p. 304). The goal of such focus groups was to provide emancipatory textual messaging to participants to trigger critical reflection and a reevaluation of worldviews. Understanding the common experiences of hopelessness and despair that citizens battle, the researchers sought to utilize literature to show participants the power within themselves to lead different lives then what they had known. Through the experiment, Cox and Vaughn concluded that transformative learning can be fostered among young South Africans to
“empower them with confidence and hope to face a difficult socioeconomic context” (Cox et al., 2016, p. 304). Within the specific context of youth hardship and vulnerability in South Africa, the researchers conclude that creating a holistic and supportive environment to learn and think critically can show youth that they have power to positively change their future.

**Books as Tools for Empowering Students**

This study employs an understanding of empowerment as a “process of coming to or finding one’s voice” that can lead to “confidence building and enhanced self-esteem” (Voice.global, 2021, p. 4). In the field of literacy research, there is a focus on seeing the impacts of reading habits in elementary-school aged children and measuring how reading is linked to academic outcomes. However, recent literature has expanded to include exploration on the benefits of adolescent critical reading “that extend beyond higher achievement on standardized test scores” (Richardson et al., 2014, p. 16). Moreover, studies have been exploring more holistic impacts of reading including identity-formation and increased educational aspirations (Richardson et al., 2014). Richardson’s study examined the ‘concept of possible self’ as a reward of adolescent reading. The concept of ‘possible self’ is used to described how adolescents think about their potential future, which is impact by a myriad of factors such as ethnicity, gender, and social class (Richardson et al., 2014, p. 5).

Through structured qualitative interviews with adolescent learners in New York City, Richardson concluded that increased voluntary reading can support participants “educational aspirations, achievement, motivation, occupational choices…understanding [of] one-self and others” (Richardson et al., 2014, p. 2). Therefore, benefits of adolescent reading include exploration of self-identity and provide a meaningful way to think about one’s future goals.
Increased reflection on one’s current and future self allows participants to “distance themselves from the expectations of others” (Richardson, et al, 2014). Distance from societies’ expectations is an important aspect of Freire’s ‘conscientizo’ process as it rejects passive acceptance of one’s place in society. This discovery is especially relevant for a population that society has repeatedly attempted to constrain to inferior status and unskilled labor positions (Langa, 2021, p. 5). It is imperative Black South Africans reject historically enforced roles and positions by envisioning bright and successful futures.

There has been a multitude of recent studies looking at before and after impacts of literary intervention on student’s confidence and self-assuredness. In a 2020 study conducted in Sweden, teachers embraced collective reading experiences in a juvenile detention center by reading aloud and facilitating book discussions (Sjödin, 2020). At the end of the program, teachers described their students as “developing better self-esteem and self-confidence” as both students and readers (Sjödin, 2020, p. 588). Through observation and interviews, the study concludes that the reading project created a “sense of community” that allowed students to see things from other perspectives, and “empower students’ personal development and growth” (Sjödin, 2020, p. 591). This study concentrates on a population suffering from low self-esteem and without a clear concept of ‘future self’ as a result of their life circumstances and current environment in a detention center. Within this context, the holistic benefits of reading are proven successful.

A similar study conducted by South African researcher Nkomo aimed to identify the benefits of implementing an extensive reading program (ERP) with grade 3 learners in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. The sample population of learners came from disadvantaged backgrounds that have limited access to reading material and largely dysfunctional local libraries
The aim of Nkomo’s study was to instill a love of reading by giving students agency to select texts and have an option of languages represented in book choices including English, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sethos and more (Nkomo, 2021, p. 2). Situated within the transformative learning framework, the study emphasized co-construction of knowledge within the reading circles. Nkomo utilized an interpretivist paradigm to allow herself to interpret the world through the views and ideas of the learners. She appropriately applied Freire’s recommendation of prioritizing the perspectives of the learner, rather than centering her own experience as teacher by encouraging active participation and allowing learners to take charge of their learning.

In assessing the impacts of the reading program, Nkomo observed increased self-confidence and motivation in the learners (Nkomo, 2021, p. 6). The researcher concluded that reading critically fed into a cycle of critical thinking and creativity. Additionally, she recorded the joy and enthusiasm in the reading circle sessions. Students enjoyment in participating in the reading circle sessions is a hugely significant finding, as it suggests that given the opportunity, encouragement, and empowering environment to read, learners experience pleasure and want to read more.

**Historical Overview of South African Education**

In the 1800s, western missionaries flooded into South Africa to spread Christianity and ‘civilize’ the native population (Cobley, 1997, p. 58). Racist and problematic ideology emerged on either side of the debate between missionaries and white local leaders on the establishment of missionary schools for Black South Africans. Religious missionaries advocated for the necessity of schools and education by applying a white-savoir lens, and continuously denouncing the
practices of South Africans as “heathenistic” (Cobley, 1997, p. 59). For missionaries, it could be said they believed that they could not ‘Christianize’ without ‘civilizing.’ White leaders in South Africa resisted the spread of traditional schooling to Black South Africans out of fear of consciousness and subsequent rebellion (Cobley, 1997, p. 59). As World War I and World War II led to increased industrialization and economic growth, the white minority of South Africa created education systems that taught Black South Africans limited skills to fulfill semi-skilled labor roles that served white-owned businesses.

During apartheid in South Africa, the National Party passed legislation that created an inferior and racialized education system to reduce the levels of critical thinking in schools for Black South African children. The Bantu Education Act of 1952 mandated that “blacks be provided an education that would prepare them for servitude” in an attempt to continue exploiting Black South Africans for labor (Pigford et al., 1995, p. 110). In schools for Black children, teachers were trained to use methods that emphasize rote learning and memorization rather than critical thinking (Pigford et al., 1995, p. 111). Pedagogically, the schools used teaching methods that limited the student’s ability to actively think in an attempt to limit student agency and activism. Further, curricular focus emphasized the achievements and culture of white South Africans, and “either omitted or denigrated the achievements and culture of blacks” (Pigford et al., 1995, p. 111). Under the National Party, the curriculum promoted and affirmed racist Afrikaner-centered European history that barely recognized the presence and identity of Black children (Langa, 2021, p. 6). When Black figures or history was included in the curriculum, it was presented through the lens of white superiority and Black inferiority (Langa, 2021, p. 6). Through these pedagogical and curricular methods, the government built the education system to silence the voices of Black South African children.
The National Party restricted mobility for Black South Africans through a number of prejudiced practices and policies that continue to plague the South African education system. The Job Reservation Act of 1956 effectively preserved the majority of jobs for White citizens, keeping Black South Africans at the periphery of the economy (Langa, 2021, p. 5). In urban areas, this law ensured there was no interracial competition for employment opportunities by sanctioning them off for the dominant minority white population (Langa, 2021, p. 6). Black South Africans living in the townships supplied White-owned industries with cheap and reliable labor through oppressive, inequitable, and racist laws (Langa, 2021, p. 5). The historical attempts to squash Black South African learners’ ability to engage critically through their education informs the emphasis on critical engagement with literature in this study. While progress has been made in the last 30 years, stark inequalities and chronic underperformance across racial and socioeconomic lines persist as continued impacts from colonization and apartheid in South Africa (Amnesty International, 2020).

Recognizing the potential of literature to empower the oppressed African population, the National Party created strict guidelines to limit the presence of libraries in areas zoned for Black South Africans. Libraries had to be cleared as under social control to receive official sanction, and access to libraries became systematically controlled by the National Party (Cobley, 1997, p. 1). The manipulation of the education system and gatekeeping of literature is necessary to understanding the current literacy crisis in South Africa.

It is integral to recognize the resistance and demand for access to literacy by Black South Africans. The small black elite in South Africa spoke out for the need for access to books and increased reading amongst Black South Africans under the National Party (Cobley, 1997, p 60). Beyond access to literature, African elite John Tengo Jabavu, a political activist and editor of
South Africa’s first newspaper written in Xhosa, argued for access to culturally relevant books. Recognizing the racialized curriculum in South African schools, Jabuvu advocates, “These books do not provide attractive reading for our youths for they instinctively feel that the Native in the story is being unnecessarily painted in the Blackest of colours” (Cobley, 1997, p. 61). The desire for access to literature, specifically culturally relevant and Black South African authored texts, dates back over a century. While the racist narrative that Black South Africans do not want to read persists, historical sources provide more than enough evidence of a strong demand for literature both prior to and during the National Party’s reign in South Africa (Cobley 1997, p. 69). Countless fundraisers and initiatives championed by Black South Africans fought for local libraries, seeing reading “as an important route to self-awareness and self-advancement” (Cobley, 1997, p. 76).

Reading Culture in South Africa

On August 15th, 2012, the South African government published an extensive National Development Plan (NDP), outlining key goals and implementation strategies to “eliminate poverty and reduce inequality” by the year 2030 (National Development Plan, 2012, p. 14). The vision statement describes an idealized version of South Africa in which as a society, “We love reading” (National Development Plan, 2012, p. 4). Seven years after the publication of the National Development Plan, current President Cyril Ramaphosa gave a State of the Nation Address in which he emphasized the need to create a “culture of reading” to help meet the broader employment and socioeconomic inequalities in South Africa (Government Communication and Information System, 2019, p. 11). He claimed the government “will need to
mobilize the entire nation behind a massive reading campaign” to ensure every 10-year old can read for meaning by 2030 (Government Communication and Information System, 2019, p. 11).

Unfortunately, in the 4 years since President Ramaphosa’s declaration of a “massive reading campaign”, and 11 years after the NDP’s vision of South Africa as a reading nation, the 2023 Reading Panel Background Report predicted that currently, 82% of fourth graders cannot read for meaning (Spaull, 2023, p. 1). The South African Book Development Council concluded from their 2016 National Survey that the most important factors in driving reading behavior include: “ability, time/priority, access, and attitudes” (South African Book Development Council, 2016, p. 1). Discussion of each of these prerequisites of a reading culture is explored more thoroughly below:

**Ability**

As stated, over ¾ of all South African 4th graders fail to read for meaning. 77 million adults (15+) in South Africa cannot read or write (International Literacy Day, 2023). The 2022 Background Report of the Reading Panel provided four recommendations to the government to address this problem, including implementing reading measurements nationally, a minimum set of resources, increasing budgets, and auditing university teacher education programs (Spaull, 2023, p. 5). Currently, almost no progress has been made in any of these categories, and the national government has not implemented the Reading Panel’s recommendations. Therefore, the ability to read remains a huge barrier for millions of current learners and adults in South Africa.

**Time/Priority**

Previous literature continually demonstrates the link between literacy and socioeconomic status. In impoverished households with no monthly income, families are in survival mode, leaving few resources and little time to create an environment conducive to literacy learning (Le
Roux, 2020, p. 2). According to Statistics of South Africa, the nation’s unemployment rate rested at 30% (pre-Covid times), and many families face malnutrition, migrancy, violence, and diseases such as tuberculosis and HIV/Aids (Le Roux, 2020, p. 2). As a result of the life-threatening factors that South African families face, teaching children and learning to read drop in priority. Until survival circumstances that affect family life in the nation are improved to make literacy a higher priority, it is unlikely the literacy rates will improve.

**Access**

Despite the government’s goal of ensuring equal access to books by proclaiming that “every community has…a local library filled with a wealth of knowledge” physical access to books remains a huge barrier for many South Africans (National Development Plan, 2012, p. 5). Not only is there a lack of libraries, both school-based and community based, but even the libraries in existence are unequally distributed across the nation and rarely adequately stocked. Despite KwaZulu Natal having the highest population of 10.2 million people, and a land area of 7.7% of the nation, it only has 174 public libraries (Mojapelo, 2017, p. 2). Comparatively, the wealthier Western cape with a population of 5.8 million residents has 347 libraries (Mojapelo, 2017, p. 3). Access to books remain inadequate for the majority of students in South Africa, and disproportionately inaccessible to Black students and students of low socioeconomic status. In fact, the South African Book Development Council’s published survey revealed that participants rated access to books as a greater barrier to reading than affordability (2016, p. 45).

**Attitude**

A major factor influencing the attitudes of citizens around reading is the cultural relevance and representation in accessible literature. The majority of children’s books in South Africa are stories from Western cultures and contexts, creating a cultural barrier to a reading
nation (Le Roux, 2020, p. 2). Additionally, most children’s books are in English, despite it being a minority language in the country (Le Roux, 2020, p. 2). In a newsletter funded by The National Research Foundation, Professor John Aitcheson of the University of KwaZulu-Natal describes that reading is treated as “uncool, nerdy, and unpopular” (2018). In the national study surveying over 38,000 South African adults, only 9% agreed that “you grew up where reading was encouraged” (South African Book Development Council, 2016, p. 35). Further, only 1/3 of participants agreed that everyone should be able to read (South African Book Development Council, 2016, p. 1).

Prior literature examines the generally negative attitudes of South Africans in regard to reading. High rates of unemployment, poverty, violence, and disease makes it hard for families to prioritize reading for themselves or future generations. Quantitative studies measuring school and community library quantity, distribution across the nation, and stock availability reveals a significant lack of access to books for the majority of South Africans. These factors contribute to creating a majority negative attitude surrounding reading. These results indicate that as a nation, South Africa systematically fails in providing citizens with the ability, time, access, and attitudes to drive reading behaviors.

The evaluation of such failure is supported by national surveys in South Africa. For example, The General Household Survey (GHS) found that 47.6% of children never read a book in 2017 (General Household Survey, 2017, p. 11). Almost 60% of adults (16+) currently live in households without a singular book (South African Book Development Council, 2016, p. 81). Moreover, the problem seems to be getting worse. As of 2021, 51.2% fewer people are reading books than were in 2016 (McLoughlin, 2021). The emphasis on creating a culture of reading in South Africa is often used to support initiatives to improve literacy ability. This paper focuses on
increasing access to literature not only for academic benefits such as increased vocabulary, comprehension, and reading fluency, but addressing its holistic benefits to the reader.

**Contextualizing Cato Manor:**

Cato Manor’s rich history must to be understood to give context to this study. The township lies approximately 7 kilometers from Durban’s central business district, its location inextricably linked to the history of exploiting Black labor and forced resettlements across racial lines during Apartheid (Umkhumbane Schools Project, 2023). A map displaying the location of the township in relation to the city’s center is provided to the right. (Rod et al., 2017)

Although the booming urban industries during World War I and II relied on African labor, government officials created strict policies to maintain Black South Africans as merely “temporary visitors” rather than residents of the city (Ngidi, 2020 p. 29). Despite their vast impact in the economy of Durban, the government provided no infrastructure support in the township they forced them to occupy, leaving the thousands of residents with poor housing and no water, electricity, schools, or other social services (Ngidi, 2020, p. 36). Township culture was therefore created by the government to be a transitional space that relied on survival. As per the social phenomenon, the overcrowding in Cato Manor paired with lack of infrastructure and governmental support led to increased tensions and violence among its residents. The social tensions and desperation compounded with the passing of the Group Areas Act in 1950, an
extreme form of urban social engineering that assigned land to communities based on racial categorization (Ngidi, 2020, p. viii). In KwaZulu-Natal the government assigned the land of Cato Manor to be a ‘White Area’ (Umkhumbane Schools Project, 2023). These tensions led to a violent outburst in Cato Manor in 1960; the death of 9 policemen by mob in an Emergency Camp (Cato Manor Development Project, 2002). The deaths led to a crackdown from the municipality, and Cato Manor residents were forcibly removed over the next five years.

At the present time, Cato Manor has a population of 90,000 residents. High rates of poverty, unemployment, violence, HIV and TB continue to plague the community. In a 2018 case-study assessing youth unemployment in Cato Manor, researcher Ntshiza concluded that a lack of accessibility to basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing continues the desperate cycle of poverty, crime, and drug abuse for adolescents in the township (p. 101). Cato Manor has five secondary schools connected through Umkhumbane Schools Project; a new type of NGO that unites resources between struggling schools (Umkhumbane Schools Project). A principal of a Cato Manor secondary school reported drug dealers targeting local youth as a cause of high school dropout rates in the community (Gray et al., 2017, p. 26). These hardships in Cato Manor are linked with low self-esteem and loss of self-respect for youth (Gray et al., 2017, p. 92). Such sociological contexts increase the need to support adolescents in identity formation through increasing opportunity for self-reflection and confidence-building.

Conclusion

From a theoretical framework and through analysis of prior research studies that implement reading groups in different international contexts, there are clear holistic benefits for increased self-confidence and self-reflection through critical engagement with literature.
Additionally, this comprehensive review provides context and explanation for the lack of reading culture in South Africa. The historical impacts on the education system and library infrastructure must be addressed as the nation works to create a culture of reading. This literature review intends to override the racist and untrue historical narrative that a reading culture does not exist among Black South Africans as a result of lack of interest or ability. Rather, it is created and perpetuated by a lack of access to culturally relevant, accessible, and affordable literature. The South African government recognizes the need for a reading culture, which is an important step in moving towards increasing access to literature for the majority of the population. However, as the nation works to create a culture that ‘loves to read,’ the intervention must be informed by recognizing books not only as valuable for increasing literacy, but equally valued as empowering tools that uplift the voices of marginalized youth in South Africa.
Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a generic qualitative research design paradigm which Percy, Kostere and Kostere indicate is a valid approach to qualitative research (2015, p. 76). Researchers Cooper and Endacott describe the purpose of general qualitative research as a framework that “seek[s] to discover and understand…a process, or the perspective and worldviews of people involved” (2007, p. 817). The centering of empathy in qualitative research was especially integral to this project given the population of participants being under 18 years old. Additionally, the qualitative research paradigm supported the researcher’s goal to understand thoughts and behaviors, rather than reach explanatory outcomes. A generic qualitative design allowed the researcher flexibility for the focus groups to be guided by the curiosities and sharing’s of the participants, a key to the research studies focus on observing learner engagement with the texts.

The target population for this study included public secondary school learners (14-18 years old) in low socioeconomic and historically oppressed regions of South Africa. The sample population came from grade 10 and 11 learners in the semi-urban township of Cato Manor, just outside of the city of Durban. The study utilized a purposive volunteer sampling method. The researcher connected with the administrative assistant of the public secondary-school network in Cato Manor and the branch assistant of a local educational non-profit who aided in distributing participant flyers to grade 10 and 11 students. The sampling was purposive because it specifically included grade 10 and 11 learners in Cato Manor who spoke English. It was a volunteering sample method as the learners agreed to participate, brought a guardian signed permission form and attended both focus group sessions. Participants in the focus group included
grade 10 and 11 learners at Cato Manor public schools. The groups were constituted as detailed below.

Focus Group A:
- Grade 11 Learners – 7
- Grade 10 learners – 3
- Total learners – 10

Focus Group B:
- Grade 11 Learners – 5
- Grade 10 Learners – 5
- Total Learners – 10

Focus Group C:
- Grade 11 Learners – 5
- Grade 10 Learners – 6
- Total Learners – 11

Every participant received a flyer with information inviting them to participate in the study, either distributed to them by their English teacher at school, or a faculty member at the educational non-profit (Appendix A-B).

Focus group A: All ten learners provided signed ethical forms from the assistant director of the organization. Additionally, 7/10 learners provided signed consent from a parent. For the three learners who failed to produce a signed consent form from a guardian at home, the assistant director at the educational non-profit consulted with the guardians to ensure permission before signing the ethical consent form on their behalf.

Focus group B: The English teacher for every learner signed an ethical consent form. Additionally, 10/12 learners provided an ethical agreement form signed by a guardian at home.

Focus group C: All 13 participants who engaged in the focus groups had signed written consent forms from their English teachers at school. Additionally, 11/13 participants returned signed permission forms from guardians at home.
Focus Group Preparation and Ethics

The researcher explored texts online and in local Durban bookstores to select literature for the focus group sessions, taking into account English level ability, reading comprehension skills, and relevant themes within the texts. The researcher selected four poems by Black South African youth from *Fairytale Moon*, a published collection of poetry written by 11-13-year-old South African youth (Appendix C). This text was selected for a number of reasons. First the age range of the poets lent itself to meaningful discussion on giving value to youth voice and experience. Furthermore, the selected poems contain themes of pride in African identity, determining one’s future, recognizing self-agency, and resilience in the face of adversity.

The researcher also chose Gcina Mhlope’s short story, “Transforming Moments” from the Grade 11 English First Additional Language national curriculum. Mhlope’s short story was selected because of the text’s empowering message of finding one’s voice and gaining self-confidence. Facilitation guides for each selected literary text and comprehensive lesson plans for focus group day 1 and day 2 are included in the appendix.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred at two public schools in Cato Manor, and one educational non-profit organization that hosted learners from public schools in Cato Manor. Each focus group met twice over a one-week period. The focus group sessions occurred after school hours and lasted 1-1.5 hours each, with a 10-minute break in the middle. Snacks and drinks were provided. At each location, faculty from the school or the non-profit organization either remained in the room for the entire session or came in and out of the room throughout the duration of the focus
group. At the onset of each session, the researcher collected written ethics forms and obtained verbal consent to audio-record the session.

The ‘culture’ of the focus groups was informed by research-based practices to increase comfortability of each participant through transparency of research goals, agenda of the session, gratitude, and relationship building. The researcher’s role, presence in South Africa, and research question were verbally explained in addition to the written objectives on the flyer and consent forms for each learner.

During the focus group sessions, the researcher distributed printed copies of literary texts to each participant. Each poem was read in full 3x, once individually, once by the researcher, and once in a circle out loud by the participants. The researcher then asked questions and participants engaged in dialogue on textual themes, line-analysis, opinion of the text, and other ideas raised by participants. Based on the discretion of the learners, the short story was read out loud by the researcher, or in a circle paragraph by paragraph by participants. Day 2 of the focus group session concluded with a group reflection on the experience participating in the focus groups and an opportunity to share feedback. Lastly, the researcher distributed a small notebook and pen to each learner with a note of gratitude inside (Appendix G).

**Data Analysis**

This study utilized an inductive analysis approach. An inductive analysis process does not “attempt to fit the data into any pre-existing categories” (Percy, 2015, p. 80). Instead, once all the data had been collected from the focus group sessions, the researcher synthesized the data and identified repeating themes and patterns (Percy, 2015, p. 80). The synthesis of themes from post-data analysis forms a composite synthesis of data collected to support the generalized
research goal of understanding of the ways in which literature creates meaningful and empowering dialogue between grade 10 and 11 students in South Africa. (Percy, 2015, p. 81).

Trustworthiness

Credibility was ensured through utilizing numerous peer-reviewed journal articles to inform the scope and methodology of this study. When unclear of meaning of a comment by a learner in the focus group, the researcher asked the participant to speak louder or expand upon their idea to ensure no misrepresentation of participant meaning. Additionally, the researcher thoroughly transcribed audio recordings and compared transcriptions against written notes made during the session to ensure the ideas shared were accurately represented in the data.

This research study is transferrable given the high-levels of transparency in text-selection practices and lesson plan facilitation guides. Additionally, the study can be generalized to similar contexts by following the described efforts to create a culture of transformative learning through equal participation by facilitator, sitting in a circle, and relationship building with participants.

The study ensured dependability by replicating the focus group sessions with three different groups of learners. Because the participants came from different schools and organizations within Cato Manor, it ensures the data collected is not unique to one school, but representative of the larger sample population of the study.

The data collected in this research study was supported by peer-reviewed research studies discussed in the literature review. Richardson’s article entitled, “Rewards of reading: Toward the development of possible selves and identities” in the *International Journal of Educational Research* concludes that critical reading can provide learning opportunity that scaffolds identity formation in adolescents (Richardson, 2007, p. 1). Similarly, Swedish researcher Elin Sjödin’s
2022 study in *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* concludes that teachers reported students increased self-confidence and self-esteem through the implementation of reading groups (Richardson, 2007, p. 588). This study is situated within a broader educational discourse that recognizes the empowering impacts on one’s sense of self through reading (Freire, 1983, p. 5).
Limitations of the Study

It is essential to recognize limitations and biases within this project to create a transparent representation of the research process and avoid repetition of the same shortcomings in future replications of the study. This section will outline challenges faced in the completion of the research process and recognize potential research biases.

First, the racial and national identity of the researcher as a white American student must be recognized. The identity of the researcher is relevant because it reveals a limited and outsider perspective to cultural norms, social systems, and experiences of South African learners. As an American student primarily studying education in a western context, there is an inherent inability to fully understand the intricacies and complexities of the participants' lives and experiences. Additionally, the identity of the researcher can create a dynamic within the focus groups of participants wanting to please, which can impact the raw data collected. Lastly, the researcher’s American accent may have been a barrier to participant understanding the questions and being able to answer in the way intended, especially for learner’s whose first language is not English. Despite these limitations, Gorman and Clayton (2009), authors on qualitative research, advocate that a researcher can create a valid and reliable study by recognizing and reflecting on their identity and taking proactive steps to challenge any potential cultural bias.

While recognizing that it is impossible to mitigate all challenges or biases the researcher’s identity presents, several steps were taken to minimize the impacts. The researcher lived in Durban studying social and political transformation in South Africa for two months before beginning the research study. The researcher also visited multiple schools in Durban prior to the onset of this study, and extensively researched the Cato Manor community before entering. In addition, the researcher has previous experience teaching literacy intervention in low-income
schools in the United States, creating a foundational understanding and experience with working with students in a literacy-based context. Lastly, in response to the language and accent challenges, the learners read the poems and short story to themselves, and out loud to each other.

Another key limitation to this study was the restricted time frame in which it was conducted. Within a four-week period, the research was conducted, analyzed, and written. In future replications of this study, additional time would allow the researcher the opportunity to interact with more focus groups and collect a greater quantity of data.

Lastly, the sample selected for this focus group is not representative of a random population of grade 10 and 11 learners in Cato Manor. Although the researcher intended for the participant letter to be distributed to all students by the director of the NGO and English teachers in Cato Manor Secondary Schools, the learners were handpicked by these adults. The teachers selected top students with strong English language ability. Upon discussion with the adults, the researcher learned they specifically invited students who had high English-level ability and participated well in class to positively represent their schools. Therefore, the sample population is not a direct representation of the target population. It is necessary to acknowledge these challenges to achieve transparency. Despite these limitations, this research presents thought-provoking and important findings that outlines empowering impacts of engaging in critical reading with learners in Cato Manor, South Africa.
Data and Data Analysis

Across the focus group sessions, students engaged with texts in meaningful, critical, and empowering ways. As this study sought to explore how students engage with literature, the data discusses the patterns that emerged throughout the learners’ dialogue. The Governance and Social Development Center (GSDRC) definition of empowerment refers to it as a “fuzzword,” meaning a term with expansive and multiple meanings (Combaz et al., 2014). The flexibility in understanding empowerment allowed the researcher to address the multitude of ways a reading environment and literary content can empower student voices. The inductive analysis synthesizes patterns in the data to understand the ways in which the environment, the literature itself, and critical engagement create an empowering experience for South African learners. Careful consideration and research-based methods sought to create a culture of problem-based learning, in which learners and the facilitator equally held and shared knowledge (Dawson, 2018, p. 119). In addition, the selection of texts utilized in this study share themes of designing one’s future, achieving one’s dreams, and pride in a Black identity. Students critically engaged with the texts by pushing beyond comprehension-style questions to debate societal and cultural challenges. The result is a successful, dynamic and highly empowering literary process self-reported by the learners.

Section 1 outlines the creation of an empowering environment for the learners in which they engage as co-creators of knowledge. Furniture arrangement, relationship-building, and transparency in recognizing the differences in identity between the researcher and the learners all actively sought to create an open and comfortable space. The goal of an empowering environment is to allow learners to step outside of their role as a student and bring their whole selves to the sessions.
Section 2 outlines how learners engaged with the content in the chosen texts over the two-day focus group sessions. Subcategory 1 outlines how carefully selected texts can be used to empower student voices by providing representation of Black South African authors. Shared author identity sought to increase association of writers with participants shared racial and national identities for students to recognize the power and importance of their voice. The second subsection outlines how students interpreted the written word through relating it to their experiences in the physical world. It focuses on student’s ability to share vulnerably through the avenue of literary interpretation. The final two subsections explain two themes pulled out of the literature in all of the focus groups; dreams/future and pride in Black South African identity. These sections outline general feelings of insecurity and hopelessness. Both textual themes conclude by discussing how learners utilized the literature to increase self-agency in defining their future and increase pride in their racial identities.

Section 3 zooms out to understand how pedagogical methods and critical reading empowered the student voices. Critical reading includes student’s ability to critique, debate, and affirm their own ideas through the text. Countless conversations on societal issues in Cato Manor such as gender-based violence, drug abuse, and diversity emerged through the engagement with the texts, and students used critical thinking skills to discuss difficult topics with one another.

Finally, section 4 breaks down the key outcomes and benefits students described in reflection on their experiences during the focus group sessions. Learners valued the vulnerability and connection with peers in the culture of the focus groups, author’s pride in a Black South African identity, and enjoyed the act of shared reading throughout the sessions.
Creating an Empowering Environment for Collective Reading

Educational research outlines proactive steps to create a transformative learning environment in which learners feel valued as contributing actors in the formation of knowledge. A prerequisite to genuine engagement in emancipatory education is a supportive and holistic environment (Cox et al., 2016, p. 14). To create such an environment, students and researcher sat in an intimate circle facing each other during each focus group session. The physical structure of the circle reflected the intended goal of an anti-hierarchical dynamic between researcher and learners. In Sjödin’s research study (2020) implementing reading groups with troubled youth, he discovered that “furniture arrangement …created distance from ordinary schoolwork by enacting a gathering of readers who were more than students at school” (p. 589). Additionally, each focus group session opened with participants stating their name and how they are feeling to create moments of individual recognition between researcher and each participant. The purpose of these measures was to break out of the traditional system of banking education in which students simply listen as receivers of knowledge in an educational environment.

Recognizing the power-dynamics of a white, American researcher working with Black South African youth, the researcher acknowledged their differences in identity at the onset of the focus group session. The researcher attempted to create an equalized environment through a method of continuous gratitude, framing each session by saying, “I just want to reiterate that I'm coming into your space. I know that I'm in your community, in [redacted], so just thank you guys again for letting me be here.” (April 12th, 2023). Additionally, the researcher shared carefully selected pictures of her family to connect with learners and shared openness. Literature shows active participation in a reading project from a teacher or facilitator, can “flatten the relationship
between them” and create an atmosphere where “fear of failing was reduced” (Sjödin, 2020, p. 588).

Impacts of a supportive and comfortable environment can be measured through the difference in levels of nervousness and anxiety of focus group participants between day 1 and day 2. For example, in Focus Group C, 8/11 of the participants described their feeling at the start of day 1 as “nervous” (Focus Group C, April 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2023). The change in feeling is stark on the day 2 of the focus group session, as students described themselves as “excited,” “looking forward to this,” “very happy,” and “not anxious anymore” (April 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2023). The difference in levels of comfortability across day 1 and day 2 suggests how creating a supportive and encouraging environment makes a difference for student comfortability in a reading environment.

**Student Empowerment through Literary Content**

*Representation in Authorship*

A crucial step to empowering students through literature is utilizing texts that represent and connect to the identity of the learners. The first exercise of focus group day 1 involved understanding student association with authorship identity in literature. Learners participated in a closed-eye guided activity to envision an author or poet; probed to consider their race, gender, hair color, what skills they have, and more. The learners were then invited to share their imagined authors. The results are discussed below.

One learner described their invented author by language ability, stating, “A person who knew grammar, knew English” (Focus Group A, April 12\textsuperscript{th}, 2023). When asked by the researcher if the person also spoke Zulu, the learner responded, “I do think it’s English.”
association of writing with English can be explained by a myriad of factors. First, the schools in Cato Manor are predominately taught in English. Additionally, despite South Africa having 11 official languages, the languages most often published in South Africa are English and Afrikaans, the two official languages during apartheid (Möller, 2013, p. 1). The student’s idea that a writer must be writing in English is significant because it shows a perception of the voice most commonly heard and valued in literature in a language that is associated with whiteness, colonization, and oppression.

The majority of remaining descriptions of authors from students are variants on a white man. Two students described a British man, one with a “beard like Abraham Lincoln,” and another student saw a Chinese man (Focus Group C, April 17th, 2023). It is imperative that students see themselves as individuals whose stories and words matter, and one important way is to engage with Black South African authors. Current discourse on the importance of increasing visibility of works by author’s with minoritized identities discusses the impacts of ‘place and possibility’ (Stadler, 2015, p. 203). Place validates and values the shared experiences and identities of young adult and adolescent readers (Stadler, 2015, p. 203). Possibility shows the readers who look like and have similar lived experiences to the author what they can achieve. Reading texts by authors who represent readers nationally and racially can help learners see the value in their voice. Identity and representation in literature contribute to the “beliefs, aspirations, academic effort, and outcomes” of the readers (Stadler, 2015, p. 1). Unfortunately, the majority of students associated writing and authorship with whiteness.

Only two participants envisioned writers that were female or Black. One student described a Black, passionate, female, poet “wearing a traditional attire” (Focus Group A, April 12th, 2023). A second student in a different focus group also imagined a Black author, and
similarly described the writer as “traditional” (Focus Group B, April 13th, 2023). There appeared to be a perception among learners that Black writers are linked to tradition and exist in a different genre and style than other authors. The association of Black South African writers as ‘traditional’ exposes a homogenous perception of Black writers. Additionally, considering the students context of living in a semi-urban township, there is a greater distance between themselves and their understanding of Black writers, making it harder to relate to and see themselves.

The focus groups revisited this idea during reflections at the end of day 2 after reading poetry and a short story from Black South African authors. When asked more directly, “Is it important to you to read stories written by Black South African poets and writers?” the students discussed the benefits and significance of representation in author identity (April 14th, 2023). While there were unanimous affirmative murmurs, one student spoke out clearly stating, “This program has helped me realize that you know, in our country we have the power to write and to inspire other people” (April 14th, 2023). The data from this study supports previous literature that the identity of authors expands learners understanding of their own possibility to be writers, see the power in their voice, and their capability to inspire others.

_Relating to the Text_

Another key benefit to examining texts written by authors that represent the national and racial identities of the learners was the increased relatability to the text. Relating to literature is significant as prior research that concludes that when students identify with characters and texts, they can “reflect on personal concerns, including family nostalgia and loss, adolescent challenges…culture” (1998, p. 273). Given the challenges students experience in Cato Manor,
the ability to reflect on personal challenges and loss is instrumental. During the course of the focus groups, students spoke about relating to challenges such as maintaining friendships, fear of the future, and experiencing racism. Peer connection and feeling listened too is a key preventative and coping strategy for teens struggling with mental health and loneliness (Sundqvist et al., 2021, p. 245-246). Relatability among common struggles in adolescence also normalizes and de-stigmatizes such experiences and feelings. Thus, sharing and listening within the reading circles created a space where students felt comfortable discussing personal challenges and empowered students to bravely reflect and normalize their experiences.

In “Life” by Tlhokomelo Sangweni, several students picked out the following line to discuss: “Why do our peers die before we learn, drugs shouldn’t be used?”

In focus group B, one student connected this line to her own experience with peers, stating,

This poem is talking…about things that are happening in our society. Like here in South Africa. So, first thing is like drugs, obviously drugs are being pursued by our peers. We tend to peer [pressure] our peers to do immoral stuff like drugs
- Learner, Focus Group B, April 2014, 2023 [12:38]

The learner is able to connect to the poem’s broad sociological problem of drug abuse among youth to her own experience of peer pressure and drug abuse in Cato Manor. Following this statement, another student shared her experience of losing her friend to drug abuse, stating, “I relate to this line…to me it feels like this was supposed to be said before she passed away” (Focus Group B, April 13th, 2023). The learner bravely shared how this line connected to her own experience of losing a friend due to drug abuse. These difficult conversations occur out of student-selected lines and expose high levels of relatability to the learners’ lives.

“This line also addresses gender-based violence, suffering, sickness, and loneliness.
Similarly, to focus group A and B, focus group C discussed the relatability of the poem. One
learner stated, “these are things that we see, that we live amongst” (Focus Group C, April 17th, 2023). Navigating conversations on death, poverty, and gender-based violence is incredibly difficult, but it is also imperative and recognizes problems that learners live with every day. By utilizing texts to open dialogue on these conversations, it allowed the readers to vulnerably share about their own experiences. The learners shared about their own challenges and battles with feelings of loneliness and being misunderstood in an unexpected way. Their feelings are compounded by impoverished circumstances that are linked to lower rates of self-esteem (Gray et al., 2017, p. 92).

In discussing Poem 1, “African Child,” many students shared a line they related to most. In Focus Group B, a student vulnerably described her interpretation and connection to the following line

“I am the attempts of a toddler stumbling at the foot of a stairway”

I feel like I've felt that somewhere within me... I'm going through a lot and I feel like I'm so young that I feel like a toddler and I feel so vulnerable at a corner. I'm still like learning some things about myself, going deep within but I don't know nothing about myself and that scares me the most because I'm going, I'm tumbling down on a mountain and trying to stop it. So that's how I'm at like a foot of the stairway because if I would do one thing, I'd fall, and then I'd split apart, like a toddler. So, I don't know, I'm anxious, and I'm going through a very dark tunnel, but I'm going to make it out.

- Learner, Focus Group B, April 14th, 2023 [23:56]

Through sharing about a poetic line, the student opened up about her own personal and internal struggles. This raw admission of fear and self-doubt showed the emotional impact of relating to a feeling or experience described in literature. This admission of feeling lost, falling, and loneliness proved to be a pattern among students, with many participants sharing they relate to the line, “Why is life so unfair and why does it seem like nobody cares” (Life, Tlhokomelo Sangweni).
In *Transforming Moments* by Gcina Mhlope, the main character struggles to have genuine friendships. A male student bravely discussed this saying, “I know how that feels” (Focus Group B, April 15th, 2023). Because the author introduced the topic of social exclusion, it allowed the students to relate to the experience, rather than have to firstly introduce and disclose it. The impact of de-stigmatizing these topics through literature was multiplied for every participant because they subsequently got to relate to each peer who shared. A pattern emerged that after one student opened up, many other learners began disclosing more vulnerable experiences and relating with one another.

As has been stated, this study seeks to explore how Cato Manor secondary school learners engage with texts by Black South African authors. A clear theme emerged that students sought to relate too and connect with the ideas and experiences of the authors as a way to express their own feelings on difficult subjects. The texts provided the language for students to speak out on sensitive and personal topics in a meaningful and vulnerable fashion. Relating to the texts, although often in shared negative feelings, provided a space for students to feel seen, and therefore is understood as a form of empowerment. The texts empowered students to share out about personal struggles and battles with loneliness, creating a space in which students could then support one another and see they are not alone.

*Learner’s Interpretation of the Future*

The apartheid government purposefully created an economic system that solely supported the interests, mobility, and success of the white dominant class. Black South Africans were exploited and socialized to positions of servitude (Langa, 2021, p. 4). The Job Reservation Act of 1956 regulated the labor market and ensured certain jobs were reserved for White citizens and
relegated Black South Africans to serving as cheap labor for white-owned industries (Langa, 2021, p. 5). The racist laws and policies made it difficult for Black South Africans to have agency in determining future employment and life plans. In present day, a large population of Black South African adolescents in low-socioeconomic areas, such as Cato Manor, continue to face a myriad of challenges that similarly can make future dreams seem unattainable. This section aims to understand how literature can restore hope, provide learners with sense of agency, and encourage youth despite the upward battle to achieve economic mobility.

In all three focus groups, the learners spent a generous amount of time discussing lines that related to dreaming and the future. It can be deduced the topic is an anxiety-ridden issue for the learners. A line at the end of “African Child” states, “I design the future.” When prompted to each focus group “Can you design the future?” all three groups confidently and immediately exclaimed affirmatively in unison. Yet this confidence faltered through continued conversation. For example, one learner discussed her feelings on the line

“I realized the future belongs to those
Who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”
- Life by S’thabile Khumalo

The learner only partly agreed with this statement, commenting, “I think dreams can be divided into two. There are dreams that you just cannot achieve or that you can’t have in life.” (Focus Group A, April 13th, 2023). Despite previously agreeing the learners can design their own future, this participant concedes that some dreams are unattainable. Additionally, learners recognized how one’s environment can severely impact the ability to achieve one’s dreams or have agency over their future. One student, rather frustrated with the discussion on dreams and the future, bluntly stated the reality of discussing dreams in the context of Cato Manor stating,
A lot of people don't realize their capabilities, because within their environment, it limits them. We talked about home… So how do you find a home within a place where your dreams are actually quite shattered? How do you find a home within a place where it goes against everything you believe in or everything you dream about?

- Learner, Focus Group B, [43:15]

Although students affirmed that they are in control of their own futures, when discussing more broadly, they repeatedly recognize that environment can limit one’s ability to achieve dreams. The previous learner explains that home can “shatter” a dream. This pattern reveals a shared struggle to reconcile feeling empowered to design a future and battling the sociological and impoverished circumstances the learners exist within. Moreover, one learner describes a specific aspect of her environment that does not encourage her to follow her dreams; the people. The learner discussed her relation to the line: “I rise reborn from broken promises” (African Child). She expresses, “I’m rising from my mistakes and trying not to fall because many people feel that I will be nothing in life, but right now I am trying, I am trying so hard to push myself to build a future.” (Focus Group B, April 13th, 2023). Similar to the previous learner finding an inherent tension in dream achievement and his environment in Cato Manor, this second learner finds the people in her environment not supportive of her ability to build a future. Finally, a learner showed what happens as a result of existing within a context and surrounded by people who you don’t think support your dreams to build a future. She admits;

I kind of don’t believe in my dreams. I have a lot of doubts about my dreams. And I have a lot of dreams, which right now, they are not coming true any time soon…it's like losing hope. Like trying and trying and trying and still failing.

- Learner, Focus Group B, April 13th, 2023 [40:38]

The themes in the literature that provided overly simplified and sugar-coated advice to believing in yourself to achieve your dreams was repeatedly met with realistic resistance from a
population of adolescents who face seemingly insurmountable challenges: high rates of unemployment, poverty, crime, and drug abuse (Ntshiza, 2018). While the discussion on the content of the future and dream attainment revealed a sobering attitude and at times hopelessness, in discussing the impacts of reading the texts, students discussed feelings of hope and encouragement. For example, discussing how the learners felt after reading the line “The future belongs to those that believe in the beauty of their dreams” a learner stated “It kind of makes me want to achieve my goals more quickly, I got motivated by her [poet]” and “it motivates me to keep dreaming” (Focus Group C, April 17th, 2023). In Focus Group C, a learner spoke about motivation from Gcina Mhlope’s short story. The learner synthesized the message of believing in yourself across texts in focus group day 1 and day 2. They stated, “I just felt motivated…don’t give up on yourself when everything in your life isn’t perfect, you keep on going, just like we talked about yesterday” (Focus Group C, April 18th, 2023).

While the purpose of engagement with literature is not to ignore the unequal access to opportunity and resources that makes dreams attainable, it is important for students to reconcile this reality and still feel empowered to design their own future. Reading literature is not a solution to the many problems that plague the community, but this data shows it can alleviate feelings of hopelessness. Discussing the same line of believing in one’s dreams, a learner expressed a desire to share the impacts of the lesson, stating, “I believe that this line needs to be heard by the younger generation” (Focus Group B, April 13th, 2023). Therefore, this student felt empowered by the line, and believed it could have similar effects on their peers.

Given the impoverished circumstances learners in Cato Manor face, the influence that literature and empowering content can have on students should be capitalized on and better utilized. It is apparent through the data that students grapple with life’s unfairness and achieving
a promising career. Learners self-reported feeling encouraged and supported to not give up on their dreams or designing of their own future through the empowering content in the literature.

**Pride in Black South African Identity**

A theme across the selected texts is a tone of pride and embracement of Black and South African identity. These themes provided a positive representation of pride in Blackness and created a platform for learners to discuss societal racism. Additionally, it exposed an internalization of racist messaging of ‘white superiority’ and ‘Black inferiority.’ The mental and psychological effects of white superiority and black inferiority are forms of oppression that Freire advocates utilizing education to liberate citizens from. Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement also advocate for creating a positive and empowered Black identity that escapes the harrowing psychological impacts of colonialism and apartheid (Hadfield, 2017). The following data collection revealed that messaging of racial inferiority continues to shape adolescent’s perception of their identity in Cato Manor. Despite the disheartening themes of assumed black inferiority in their community, the discussion of literature revealed the powerful potential of literature to rebuff historical and present-day racist messaging to South African youth.

The poem “African Child” by Siphumelele Mtungwa sparked meaningful dialogue on racial identity. One learner in Focus Group A stated her favorite line was “I am a proud African Child” because “nowadays, Black African children are not proud of who they are because of racism” (Focus Group A, April 12th, 2023). The learner recognized the societal problem that racism is contributing to Black South African children not being proud of their identity. Furthermore, the student’s favorite line was chosen because it provided an example of racial
pride. This is significant because it shows the desire and appreciation for having literary content that provides a positive and confident outlook on one’s Black identity.

After each student read aloud their favorite empowering line from the poem “I Am Me,” the learners and facilitator discussed the impacts of verbally saying lines such as ‘I love myself for who I am’ and ‘I am proud of my culture, religion and my roots’ out loud (Nosithembiso Mahlungu). One learner shared that it is important to proclaim self-love because “most of our Black people are not proud of who they are, they want to change who they are because of how community views them” (Focus Group A, April 12th, 2023). Yet again, the learner identifies that Black people are not proud of their identity as a direct result of how they are viewed by other people. The lack of pride in one’s racial identity was repeatedly attributed to an outside source. This racist and negative messaging to the learners must be addressed by providing positive representations of Black South Africans who are proud of their identity. This theme amongst the three focus groups underscores the importance of this research project because it confirms the need for an intervention to empower struggling South African adolescent learners.

One female learner was especially touched by the themes of self-confidence and pride in identity in the poem “African Child.” She opened up about her feelings saying;

> It is inspiring to see an African person sharing about how they are proud of who they are. And I also relate to the poem in so many ways. It touched on issues of not being proud of your skin color because for females beauty is defined by social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, etcetera, so you find that dark people try to change their skin color or having issues trying to change themselves to other people’s opinions. So, what the poet wrote, it really touched me, I almost cried.
>  - Learner, Focus Group A, April 15th, 2023 [32:19]

The learner was inspired by seeing an African person have pride in themselves, and specifically, see themselves as a beautiful Black individual. While many learners spoke of
negative depictions of Black African identity due to how the ‘community’ views them, this learner specifically points to another source contributing to a low self-confidence; the media. Many learners touched on the idea of “dark people” or “our people” wanting to change themselves, emphasizing the need to empower this population because there is an undercurrent of internalized racial hierarchies. The dominance of mass-media feeds an obsession of attaining a specific definition of beauty (Wilson, 2018). Consumption data in South Africa reveals that the most popular ‘beauty’ product purchased in the nation are skin-lightening and hair straightening products. The emotional response brought on by this poem for the learner supports the conclusion that there is a lack of engagement with positive representation of empowered Black role models in literature for learners and it can be a powerful experience for Black South African youth.

The discernable pride in the author’s tone allowed the students to reflect on the lack of exposure to Black pride, and phenomenon of Black South Africans wanting to change themselves as a result of outside racialized messaging. But after such reflection and discussion, the learners reached conclusions of expressing their own pride in their identity. The tone of the authors appeared to be contagious, as learners soon began expressing pride and joy in their identity. After reading “I am Me,” students described how they felt as proud, powerful, and confident (Focus Group A, April 12\textsuperscript{th}, 2023). A male student said the line “I am proud of my culture, religion, and my roots” made him feel “proud of my lineage, my bloodline, my religion, cultures, and the history of my family” (Focus Group C, April 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2023).

Numerous patterns emerged in the discussion and interpretation of interacting with literature that contained themes of racial and national pride. Students discussed the shared experience that Black people are dissatisfied by their racial identity and want to change
themselves as a result of outside judgement and media portrayals of beauty. In South Africa, negative messaging on whiteness as beauty must be combatted by a saturating learner’s in exposure to proud and confident Black people. When students were provided with representations of Black South African poets expressing pride in themselves, it continuously was selected as a favorite by learners and led to an increased pride in oneself. Student interpretation and engagement with this literary theme suggests the great impact positive representation in literature can have in students embracing their identity and loving themselves.

**Critical Engagement with Texts**

Critical reading is defined in this paper as engaging with the voices and ideas in a text and responding to them based on one’s own experiences in the social world (Freire, 1983, p. 5; Wilson et al., 2004, p. 1). There were several occurrences across all focus groups in which a line in the texts, or an interpretation expressed, sparked passionate dialogue and debate between learners. These moments of critical engagement are a staple of transformative learning because students are learning from one another and using the ideas in the text to modify or further cement their own beliefs (Dawson et al., 2011, p. 118). This section will outline moments of transformative learning (student creativity, discovery, and reflection) through engaging passionately with one another in response to the literature.

The line “I embrace the past and design the future” in African Child by Siphumelele Mtungwa stimulated a thought-provoking and critical discussion among learners in Focus Group B. One learner posed a problem with the line stating,

But how do you embrace the past such as ours and use it to design the future? How do you go from that, embracing the past? Like you can embrace something that’s good…but he is embracing a past that Black people were oppressed
The learner does not blindly accept the words of the poet, instead, he rejects this notion and expresses his own questioning of his nation’s history of prejudice and oppression to disagree with the poet. By applying his nation’s history to the text, the learner critically puts his physical world and the written word in dialogue. Another learner defended the poet by explaining her own interpretation stating,

I feel like when he says I embrace the past he is embracing what was done to us in the past and he is saying I accept it, and I am going to heal through it, and I am going to teach my future kids of what happened in the past, but I don’t want them to dwell on it… so I feel like this person is healing through that and letting go of the past

As a facilitator, the researcher applauded both learners for their critical thinking and bravery in expressing their opinions and having the ability to disagree with a presented narrative. These types of conversations in the reading circle were highly encouraged by the facilitator who intentionally validated each voice.

In Focus Group A, the learners debated the line, “Do good while you still can, and people will remember you as a good man” (Life). The learner’s discussion mirrored grand philosophical questions relating to collective memory. A learner posed the question to the group, “Why is it that if you do good things all the time and one bad deed, people forget all the good deeds you have ever done?” (Focus Group A, April 12th, 2023). A student responded with her own belief that you should never do good things with the intended goal of impressing other people, you should “do good for your own sake” (Focus Group A, April 12th, 2023). A third student countered that even if you do good deeds for your own sake, “once you make a mistake, it is noticed by everyone.” A final learner joined the dialogue to explain that she believes that people
notice the good and bad, but they only talk about the bad things “to make themselves feel better” concluding that it is “just human nature” (Focus Group A, April 12th, 2023).

This dialogue between the students is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it shows a centralized division of power in the focus group as learners turned towards one another for questions and answers, rather than looking towards the researcher. This shows a valuing of one another’s opinions and a willingness to learn from each other, creating a space of critical pedagogy in which learners are valued and heard. Additionally, it shows moments of transformative learning because students are not passively accepting truths from the text, the facilitator, or one another. Instead, they are “responsive to complex world problems that require critical thinking” (Dawson et al., 2018, p. 118).

There were numerous discussions that followed a similar pattern. For example, a rich discussion based on debating color blindness and recognizing diversity developed out of a student problematizing the line “We are all the same” in “I am Me” by Nosithembiso Mahlungu. The student wisely contested that “in order to acknowledge or accept me for who I am you have to first understand that we are vastly different” (Focus Group B, April 14th, 2023). This created a space to further discuss the identity differences between the researcher and the learners and talk about recognizing such differences as a way to truly see and celebrate one another.

Lastly, Focus Group A debated the controversial line in “Life” by Thlokomelo Sangweni that states, “Why do most men have to be charged to learn that women should not be abused?” The learners discussed the reproduction of GBV by sons seeing their fathers hit their mothers (Focus Group A, April 12th, 2023). The reproduction of violence in households is incredibly relevant given the high rates of violence and specifically GBV both in South Africa and Cato
Manor. The literary line gave students an avenue to discuss a difficult and emotional topic that plagues their society.

The researcher observed that learners became most involved in discussion when more controversial or philosophical themes arose in text and subsequent discussion such as; GBV, healing from trauma, recognizing diversity, and being a good person. Given the historical context of education under apartheid, and present-day reports of students struggling to obtain critical thinking skills, these findings are very significant. In 2016, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies critiqued South African Schools as failing to teach critical thinking and questioning skills (Green, 2021, p. 1). A learner compared the discussion on literature in the focus group reading circles to typical reading in English class, quoting the difference as, “In English it is just like answering comprehension the questions and the language only, we don’t go within ourselves and like tell people advice or feelings.” (Focus Group B, April 14th, 2023). This quotation implies there are missed opportunities in the classroom to allow students the space and opportunity to engage critically with one another through literature. Capitalizing on literature as an avenue to increase critical thinking through critical reading must be recognized and better understood. As John Beaumont, a researcher on critical thinking concluded, “Interpreting with its sub-skill of inference is at the heart of critical thinking (Beaumont, 2010). Interpretation and relation to one’s own social experiences is an expression of critical thinking skills, showing the opportunity literature provides to sharpen and utilize critical thinking skills for learners.

As this study aims to look at how literature can empower the voices of Cato Manor youth, this outcome confirms that literature provides learners the opportunity to express and be heard in the emancipatory learning environment. The critical reading and debates shown across the focus groups created spaces for students to reflect on their beliefs and cement their own ideas.
on relevant and philosophical topics. This process is integral to identity development, and increased sense of self, an empowering process for learners.

**Outcomes and Benefits of Reading from Reflection with Learners**

Focus Group Day 2 concluded with giving the students an opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher on the experience in the reading groups. Giving students time and space to reflect on their experience was prioritized by the researcher for two key reasons. Firstly, as an objective of the focus groups was to empower student voices and encourage students to see value in their own ideas, the final exercise provided students a platform to immediately express their opinions and be heard. Additionally, the researcher wanted recommendations from the research study to include student voices as the benefactors of the focus group sessions. The following outcomes emerged as themes in reflections across the focus groups and reveal what aspects of the reading group was most valued and seen as beneficial by the learners.

**Key Outcome: Vulnerability**

In reflecting on key benefits from their experience, many students appreciated the opportunity to be vulnerable with their peers. One student from Focus Group B aptly described how it felt to engage in communal critical reading stating,

“Being here kind of made me vulnerable, kind of made me see I have been suppressing feelings and emotions … a part of me was like why am I so vulnerable to people that barely even know me? Why am I being so open, I am not like this. I am usually like the tough can’t come by me kind of girl, don’t talk to me because you have nothing to say to me kind of girl. But when I was here, I got to open up and got to learn and get to know people. And got to meet new people and know my schoolmates. I know that I’m insecure, and I feel small around people. So, when I came here I can actually, you know, talk to people and communicate better and express myself. And it’s teaching me that when I go out here as well I can like communicate and tell people how I feel and trust myself, and
love myself, and have some self-control and self-discipline when it comes to certain things.”

- Learner, Focus Group B, April 14th, 2023 [16:45]

The learner saw a difference in her level of openness, ability to connect with her peers, and express herself in a way that was atypical for her. Not only was she able to be vulnerable in the space, but she saw a benefit in the vulnerability. The learner also reflects on how she will change in how she communicates and trusts herself as a result of the focus group sessions. While she vaguely references increasing “self-control” and “self-discipline,” it can be inferred that she feels empowered to avoid temptations that she sees as negative influences in her life.

Another learner expanded upon this idea by saying, “We got to really dig inside ourselves to really find out how we feel emotionally. I didn’t know how I felt…I got to really tackle our thinking…like ‘what is up with me? How do I feel about certain things?’” (Focus Group B, April 14th, 2023). The students expressed that it wasn’t until reading and discussing the literature that she explored how she felt about many of the topics that exist in daily life in Cato Manor including racism, gender-based violence, and drug abuse. Critically reading and discussion offered an opportunity for learners to reflect upon their environment, experiences, and feelings. The revelation by students that they have not before “dug deep” into themselves in this way shows an absence in self-reflection and critical thought by students that literature can successfully fill.

**Key Outcome: Learning From Others**

A section of this analysis focused on how learners critically engaged with the texts and with each other. While the researcher highly valued this outcome, it became apparent that the learners equally valued the opportunity to connect with one another in this way. Grade 10 and 11
learners meeting sometimes for the first time quickly bonded and related to one another through the literature.

In Focus Group 2, after a student referenced experiencing loss, a student asked her, “Can I ask you a question...how are you healing from the loss of your loved ones?” (Focus Group B, April 13th, 2023). This openness between learners is a result of the vulnerable space created by each participant to ensure a positive and empowering environment.

A student from Focus Group A stated she “learned a lot from the answers, hearing opinions very different from yours” (Focus Group A, April 15th, 2023). The repetition of learning from one another as a key benefit by the students reveals they were truly listening to and learning from one another. A participant in Focus Group B stated a similar takeaway, “this helped me to see life in a very different way and get to know people’s thoughts and how they think about stuff” (Focus Group B, April 14th, 2023). Seeing life in a different way shows there was a change in thought or understanding as a result of the sessions, successfully making it a transformative learning experience for learners. The students quickly turned towards each other to ask questions about comprehension and bond over shared feelings and experiences. As discussed, connection to peers and feeling listened too are important measures to combat loneliness and hopelessness. Therefore, the intellectual and vulnerable community unexpectedly created within the focus groups proved to be a vital aspect of the experience for learners.

**Key Outcome: Increased Self-Confidence and Self-Love**

This study defined empowerment as a “process of coming to or finding one’s voice” that leads to “confidence building” (voice.global, 2021, p. 4). A crucial outcome of the focus group sessions was the specific link of reading to increased self-confidence. The students reflected and
shared that they felt encouraged by the poems content and the pedagogical approaches. Specifically, students enjoyed the poem “I am Me” in which they practiced saying empowering lines out loud in front of the group, an activity in which every participant in every focus group participated. The two most frequent lines read out of all include:

“I am who I am, and I will never change who I am and where I come from”
“I love myself for who I am so don’t try to change me”

Nearly 1/3 of the students across the three focus groups selected one of these lines. Both lines focus on the idea of not changing, an occurring pattern that students mentioned as a frequent desire for citizens in their community as a result of not embracing their Black African identity. When asked how it felt to say these words aloud, students replied, “I felt so proud of being me” and “It was a good feeling” (Focus Group C, April 17th, 2023). In Focus Group A, the student summarized she learned from the sessions that “you should speak out and constantly remind yourself that you are beautiful” (Focus Group A, April 15th, 2023). Another student explains their feelings after finishing Transforming Moments by Gcina Mhlope, stating, “You feel really great about yourself after reading. I feel really great after reading this” (Focus Group B, April 14th, 2023). The students increased self-confidence and positive take-aways after reading show the strong connection literature has to impacting feeling and emotion in adolescent readers. It is promising and encouraging to see students self-report feeling proud and happy after engagement with literature.

An objective of exposing learners to literature from Black South African writers, and specifically young poets, was to remind learners of the power in their own voice. A student showed this objective was successful when they came to the conclusion at the end of the focus groups that, “people’s experiences can change the world cause you experience just one little thing and write about it you can also change someone’s opinions about their lives” (Focus Group
B, April 14th, 2023). This statement demonstrates two important processes. First, it shows an admission that reading can change an opinion or adapt one’s own ideas on life, the definition of critical reading. The learner recognized that literature is capable of changing someone’s opinion about life. Additionally, the student showed an expansive understanding of who’s voice matters by stating that “you” can experience just one little thing and have the power to change someone else’s world. Although this may seem minor, the statement showed an understanding that anyone, including these learners or people similar to them, has this capability and power to make a difference through sharing their voice.

Key Outcome: Enjoyment of Reading

The final key outcome of the focus group sessions as reported from the students was simple enjoyment and fun. A student reported that these sessions “makes readings more fun” and another student shared surprisingly, “I actually enjoyed these sessions…I wasn’t really sure about them…I actually enjoyed it” (Focus Group C, April 18th, 2023; Focus Group A, April 15th, 2023). This outcome of enjoyment is essential because joy in reading is necessary to increase participation and attendance in the future reading or book club opportunities. Additionally, enjoyment of reading is identified as one of the five broad strategies to create a culture of reading by the South African Book Development Council (2016, p. 102). Prior literature recognizes enjoyment in reading as a key to increasing reading time, making this outcome a positive indicator of how to increase overall reading by learners (Nkomo, 2021, p. 8). The reflection that students enjoyed reading and discussing literature reveals a potential avenue to implement reading intervention for students in a positive and accepted way.
Data Analysis Conclusion

The objectives, purpose, and importance of this research are summarized best by the learners themselves. In a letter written to the researcher and presented at the end of the day 2 session by Focus Group A, the learners adeptly wrote:

You have provoked our minds into seeking a greater understanding of the human condition and rekindled our love for literature. Being a teenager is tough, but being a black, female, and hopeful teenager in South Africa is even tougher, so we thank you for filling our hearts with hope and for a greater future where we make wise decisions and do not let our circumstances define us.

- Focus Group A, April 15th, 2023

This statement signed by the learners summarizes the key discussions, benefits and outcomes of the focus groups. First, the students recognize the connection between the written word, and the physical world, the most fundamental aspect of critical reading (Freire, 1983). They recognize how engagement with literature can contribute to a greater understanding of the human condition. Not because the text explicitly provided answers to life’s questions, but because it provided a platform to discuss and reflect on the many facets and questions in relation to the human condition. The benefits of reading exist outside of the knowledge in the text as it includes the knowledge created as a result of engaging critically with the literature.

Additionally, the students acknowledged how their specific circumstances and environment present challenges to their future, naming their age, gender and race as factors. While acknowledging these challenges, the students still claimed agency in their lives by “making wise decisions” and “not letting our circumstances define us.” The students negotiated these terms through discussion and interpretation of themes amongst the text. Ultimately, this focus group determined that it is necessary to recognize how one’s social identity and
environment can make it harder to achieve a dream, but never take away all of their power to create a meaningful future.

Emancipatory knowledge and transformational learning are created with the intended goal of creating a site of hope for the learners. The learners state the sessions “filled our hearts with hope,” showing the ultimate takeaway of regaining hope and belief in oneself and the future. With all the challenges these Cato Manor learners face, it is integral to empower them by creating vulnerable and welcoming spaces, showing them that their voice matters, and encourage them to see the power they have over their futures.
Conclusion

This study sought to explore how learners critically engage with literature by Black South African authors, and subsequently, how engagement can empower the readers. The flexibility in this research design allowed the learners to have agency over directing literary discussion by lingering on thought-provoking lines, asking one another questions, and interpreting the texts authentically. The data demonstrates how students took the provided texts and ran, asking philosophical questions, showing vulnerability, critiquing author’s ideas, taking pride in their own identity, and recognizing their power in determining a future. Empowerment existed in numerous dimensions of this study. The deconstructed knowledge hierarchy between researcher and participants and spatial organization encouraged learners to be equal creators and holders of ideas worthy of being shared. Exposure to proud Black South African authors provided learners with representative examples of positive models of powerful and current writers. Seeing the impacts of writer and poets’ voices on their own ideas, the learners could see the potential effects of using their voice. Lastly, the learners got an immediate opportunity to use their voice and feel valued by providing honest feedback on their experience as participants in the research study. In each sphere of empowerment, the learners thrived.

A recurrent theme discussed by students was low self-confidence associated with their identity as Black South Africans, underscoring the importance of finding ways to empower these adolescents. Additionally, the sociological and environmental challenges plaguing the Cato Manor community can make secondary school learners feel out of control of their future. This study indicates how literature can be used as a successful intervention to restore hope in learners to achieve their dreams and determine their future. Another equally powerful recurrent theme is the sense of encouragement, pride, and hope the selected texts provided learners. Among the
many needs of the target population, a space to be vulnerable, reflect, and cement an empowered identity emerged. By creating a reading space that learners felt comfortable, the texts provided an avenue to discuss difficult and personal experiences, leading to students bonding and supporting one another.

This study presents opportunity for further research on the holistic benefits of engagement with literature for South African learners in impoverished environments. This study can be expanded upon to include data collection on the potential impacts of literary empowerment on student action. This research observed change in thought as a result of critical engagement with literature, and a future study can go beyond change in thought and self-confidence to see how empowerment could lead to concrete changes in action by students.

I recommend a future study aimed at exploring the identity of authors most accessible to Cato Manor learners. For example, what books are in the English curriculum or in the community library? A closer look at the literature most commonly presented to Cato Manor Secondary School learners could lead to meaningful recommendations on increasing youth access to authors they can relate too through shared race, nationality, or experience.

Lastly, the researcher hopes future studies apply a comparative approach to understanding the links between a critical approach to reading in a book-club style environment and pedagogy in English classrooms. What are the key differences and similarities in terms of author identity, types of engagement with the text, and agency in the classroom? In order to best understand how to create positive and meaningful associations with reading for Black South African learners in townships, there must be communication and engagement with the local schools.
The researcher hopes the data and conclusions drawn in this research project continue to exist through expansion, critique, and replication by future researchers. It is a privilege to exist within the great body of research aimed at understanding the empowering benefits of valuing student voice through a critical pedagogical approach to literature.
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Appendix A: Participant Flyer for Focus Group A

Hello!

My name is Sally and I am a university student from the United States studying and doing research in South Africa this spring. I am hosting mini book-club sessions to discuss short stories and poetry written by South Africans. Through book-club conversation, we will discover together how much each of our voices matters and how we can make a difference. It will be a casual, fun setting for everyone to share their ideas and beliefs.

Requirements for Participation
- Guardian will sign form granting permission
- Grade 10-12 student attending secondary school in Cato Manor
- Available and able to commit to 2 group meetings (1-1.5 hours each) at the [redacted] in Cato Manor

The topics for discussion include:
- Importance of reading books by South Africans
- Passions and favorite hobbies
- Who can be a writer or a poet?

Snacks and cool drinks will be provided! All you need to bring is an appetite, a signed permission form, and your wonderful ideas 😊

If you fulfill the requirements for participation and are willing to join me for this study, please have yourself or a guardian reach out to me on WhatsApp at the number: [redacted]

Date and time will be disclosed via chat.

Thank you in advance for your consideration!

Sincerely,
Sally
Appendix B: Participant Flyer for Focus Groups B and C

SIT BOOK-CLUB SESSION

Sally, the university student from the United States who is doing research in South Africa is inviting you to a 2 days book club session to discuss short stories and poetry written by South Africans. Through book club conversation, you will discover how much your voices can make a difference!

Date: Thursday 13 April 2023 - Friday 14 April 2023
Time: 2:30 PM – 4:00 PM
Venue: HOSPITALITY ROOM

✓ No fees – this program is free of charge
✓ Fill up with Pizza and drinks!

Signed permission form, below, to be returned to Miss Precious

PERMISSION & INDEMNITY FORM

I hereby give __________________________ (full name and surname of the learner) permission to attend the SIT BOOK-CLUB SESSION of The Umkhumbane Schools Project, to be held on Thursday 13 April and Friday 14 April 2023 at __________________________, from 2:00 PM – 4:00 PM.

I understand that the learner will attend this activity at his/her own risk and that neither SPARK/The Umkhumbane Schools Project, __________________________ nor any of their agents or representatives is responsible for any accident or injury that may occur in connection with the learner’s participation in this program, including related transport and excursion activities.

I give permission for SPARK/The Umkhumbane Schools Project to take photographs and videography of this learner and use these images for educational and promotional purposes thereof.

__________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian: __________________________
Cell Phone Number: __________________________
Relationship to learner: __________________________
Date: __________________________

For further information please contact Miss __________________________
Appendix C: Poetry Selections

_African Child by Siphumelele Mtungwa_
Dark cloud that blinds the day, the loud
thunder of a brewing storm.
I am the burning larva running wild from
an exploding volcano.
The river of a nation meandering, it’s
Dark waters to the raging ocean.
A colony of stars that captains a last
vessel out of the deep blue.
I am the attempts of a toddler stumbling
at the foot of a stairway.
The flap of a phoenix rising from fire, the
beauty of a song at dawn.
I am the worm that ducks the early-birds,
still waters that run deep.
I am the unity in the unity in the diversity
for East Africa to West Africa.
I paint the rainbow.
I rise reborn from broken promises.
I embrace the past and design the future.
I am a proud _African Child._

_Today by S’thabile Khumalo_
Today I woke up and realized I’m an
African
Today I walked with dinosaurs.
Today I sang my heart out with passion.
Today I realized, be it ever so humble,
there is no place like home.
Yesterday I was born, today I live,
tomorrow I die.
But mot of all, today without noticing,
I realized that the future belongs to those
Who believe in the beauty of their
dreams.

_Life by Tlhokomelo Sangweni_
Why is it so unfair,
And why does it seem like nobody cares?
Why do we have to get sick before we
learn not to play in the rain?
Why is it always innocent people that
have to suffer and go through pain?
Why do our peers die before we learn,
drugs shouldn’t be used?
Why do most men have to be charged to
learn that women should not be abused?

Life can be wonderful,
And your days can be beautiful.
So, be patient and wait,
For what you do determines your fate.
Do good while you still can,
And people will remember you as a good man.
And that’s the way it goes,
It’s life, and that how it goes.

_I am Me by Nosithembiso Mahlungu_
I am proud of myself, I trust myself, I believe in me
I never give up
I have pride in myself
I am proud of my culture, religion, and my roots
What I want to say is, always remember where you come from
Don’t be afraid to speak out
I love myself for who I am
So don’t try to change me
What I want to ask is that
Why do others tease you and want you to change?
Because they think they know more than other people
But they are wrong
We are all the same
And we will be who we want to be
So accept the way I am
I am who I am and I will never change who I am and where I came from!
### Appendix D: Lesson Plans for Focus Group Day 1

## Focus Group Outline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator: Sally Fales</th>
<th>Focus Group Day 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program: SIT ISP, Spring 2023</td>
<td>Unit Title: <em>Exposure to South African Student Poets</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Objective

**Goal:** Students read aloud and independently short poems from “Fairytale Moon: A Book of Verse From Young South Africans Aged up to 13 Years”

**Themes:**
- Exploring who is a writer, and whose voice should be listened too
- Pride in being an African child
- Grappling with inequalities in life

### Other Lesson Plan Considerations

**Key Understandings:** *What key ideas do students need to take away from today’s lesson?*

- Transparently introduce purpose and goals of the study
- Recognize the power in young South African voices through examples of published children poetry
- Discuss themes in text such as self-confidence, pride, and speaking one’s mind

**Launch**

**Provide context:**

a. Introduce myself and tell about myself before asking to do group introductions
b. Explain objectives of the study, and that participants cannot respond or leave at any time
c. Ask if anyone has any questions
d. Ask to record audio of meeting

1. **Opening Question – Pair Share:** “What is your favorite book or movie?”

**Reading**

**Poem:** Selection from “Fairytale Moon”

- Life By Tlhokomelo Sangweni (p. 52)
- African Child By Siphumelele Mtungwa (p. 38).
- I am Me by Nosithembiso Mahlangu (p. 212)
- Today by S’thabile Khumalo (p. 222)

**Discussion Facilitation**

- Which poem did you enjoy most – why?
- Is it easy to relate to the themes / content in the poetry, why or why not?
- Are there any ideas in the poems you disagree with? Which poem and line?
- How do you feel about reading poetry from children?
- What makes a poet or a writer? Are these children poets?
- Do you relate to any of the ways the poets describe themselves?
- What do you think are impacts for these students to have their poetry published in youth?
- How does writing or expressing one’s opinion impact one’s self-confidence?

**Wrap – Up**

- Ask for closing opinions/ thoughts/ questions
- Review time and location of next focus group
- Thank participants
In-Depth

1) Purpose of the study, ability to opt-in or out at any time

- Learning from each other
- Sharing in something I love to do - reading & writing

2) Thanks yous!

- Sincere - time, thoughts, getting to know me, value of your feelings and ideas

- Get up & go to bathroom or eat at any time; very important to me you feel comfortable in this space - it is your space [Silence is on]

- Ask to record

3) Want to know you - introductions, name, favorite book or movie, how you feel? [Take a turn]

4) Close your eyes - what do you think of if I ask you to picture a writer

- Author, poet?

- What does this person look like - age, gender, hair color?

- What skills do they have - what makes them a good writer? EX/smart, funny, shy?

5) Read poems 1-2

6) 5 minute break - mingle/eat/bathroom - 5 min marks

7) Read poems 3-4

8) Repeat exercise #1 - share out, who did you see? Did this feel different cluing it the second time?

Questions:
- Does it surprise you to find out who wrote this poetry?
- Was it easy to relate to these poets?
- Does the meaning/importance of the poetry change for you?

- Knowing who wrote it? Why or why not?
- How does it make you feel?

- Are you a writer? Can you be a writer?

- How does writing or expressing one's opinions impact self-confidence?

- What was your favorite poem? Why? Tell a partner and then share out.

9) Wrap-up

- Last Q, thoughts, opinions?
- Reminder for following session!
Appendix E: Annotated Poetry

Poetry Selections from Fairytale Moon

African Child by Siphumelele Mtungwa (p. 38)  p. 73
Dark cloud that blinds the day, the loud
thunder of a brewing storm.
I am the burning larva running wild from
an exploding volcano.
The river of a nation meandering, it's
Dark waters to the raging ocean.
A colony of stars that contains a last
vessel out of the deep blue.
I am the attempts of a toddler stumbling
at the foot of a stairway.
The flap of a phoenix rising from fire, the
beauty of a song at dawn.
I am the worm that ducks the early-birds,
still waters that run deep.
I am the unity in the unity in the diversity
for East Africa to West Africa.
I paint the rainbow - What is the rainbow, how does it connect to the idea
of South African diversity?
I rise reborn from broken promises.
I embrace the past and design the future.
I am a proud African Child - What does this mean to you? Can people
design the future, what does it look
like?
- Can you do it? - if yes, how?
- Who has power to design the future?
- Do you?

Post-Reading Questions
- Which "I am" line do you relate to the most? Have you ever felt like
  any of these things? Please share if you remember.
  My line: I am the attempts of a toddler.
- Did you like this poem? Why or why not?
  Are there any lines you do not understand?
- The poet describes himself as many things, as a beautiful song, a child learning to walk,
  bright stars, and an African child. Can he be all these things? Can you be multiple things at once? What are some of the things you are?
**Today by S’thabile Khumalo (p. 222) - Age 13**

Today I woke up and realized I’m an African
Today I walked with dinosaurs.
Today I sang my heart out with passion.
Today I realized, be it ever so humble,
there is no place like home.

Yesterday I was born, today I live,
--- When is yesterday/amorow? ---
tomorrow I die.

But most of all, today without noticing,
I realized that the future belongs to those
Who believe in the beauty of their dreams.

--- 4/5 are read ---
She describes dreams as beautiful,
do you agree? Are dreams good?

**Questions**

1. Why does the poet say she walked with dinosaurs? Does anyone react to this line? Can you help explain it to us?
2. What is the tone of the poet? Does she sound happy, sad, tired, bored, proud, excited? How did the poem make you feel? Did any specific line make you feel that way?
3. The poet says “There is no place like home.” Do you agree with that? How does this line make you feel about your home?

--- Cato Manor, Durban, SA, Africa ---

4. Who do you think the future belongs to?
5. Who does the poet say the poem belongs to?
6. Are dreams beautiful?
7. How did the line “Yesterday...” make you feel? Do you think of life like that?
8. What does “Today” mean?

[10-15 min Snack Break]
*Life by Tlhokomelo Sangweni (p. 52) - Age: 12*

Why is it so unfair,
And why does it seem like nobody cares?

Why do we have to get sick before we learn not to play in the rain?
Why is it always innocent people that have to suffer and go through pain?
Why do our peers die before we learn, drugs shouldn’t be used?
Why do most men have to be charged to learn that women should not be abused?

Life can be wonderful,
And your days can be beautiful.
So, be patient and wait,
For what you do determines your fate.
Do good while you still can,
And people will remember you as a good man.
And that’s the way it goes,
It’s life, and that how it goes.

**Questions**

1. How did this poem make you feel, happy, sad, confused, something else?
   Did any specific line make you feel that way?

2. Are these questions normal to ask? Have you ever had or heard questions about life like the poet? I have asked them about innocent people many times.

3. What do you think this line means - "What you do determines your fate."
   Do you agree with this?

4. Are there any ideas, lines in this poem you disagree with?
I am Me by Nosithembiso Mahlangu (p. 212) - Age: 11

I am proud of myself, I trust myself, I believe in me
I never give up
I have pride in myself
I am proud of my culture, religion, and my roots
What I want to say is, always remember where you come from
Don’t be afraid to speak out
I love myself for who I am
So don’t try to change me
What I want to ask is that Why do others tease you and want you to change?
Because they think they know more than other people
But they are wrong
We are all the same
And we will be who we want to be
So accept the way I am
I am who I am and I will never change who I am and where I came from!

*Before discussion: everyone who feels comfortable read aloud your favorite line: “I love myself for who I am.”
1) How does it feel to say these words aloud?
2) Why is it important to say these words aloud?
3) What do you think the poet means when they say “We are all the same”? Do you agree with that line?
4) The poet says they are proud of their culture, religion, and roots, what else can we be proud of?
5) The poet says, “don’t be afraid to speak out” - what does this mean? What can we speak out about? Is there anything else?
6) How did this poem make you feel?
7) Was it easy or hard to say these words?
## Appendix F: Focus Group Day 2

### Focus Group Outline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator: Sally Fales</th>
<th>Focus Group Day 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program: SIT ISP, Spring 2023</td>
<td>Unit Title: <em>Transforming Moments by Gcina Mhlope</em></td>
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</tbody>
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### Objective

**Goal:** Students given the option to independently or collective read “Transforming Moments” and prepare for discussion about the story

**Themes:**
- Exploring if anyone else has experienced a calling to a certain passion or activity
- The role of stories and books for the protagonist
- Being true to who you are despite being challenged
- Value of role models

### Other Lesson Plan Considerations

**Key Understandings:** *What key ideas do students need to take away from today’s lesson?*
- Finding one’s passions / interests
- Importance of character using her voice

### Introduction

Introduce Focus Group Goals

**Launch**

Provide context:
- Provide brief overview and background on author Gcina Mhlope and her role as an educational activist and writer
- Go over agenda for the day and repeat everyone has ability to exit focus group if they so choose
- Ask permission to audio-record the focus group session

1. **Opening Question – Pair Share:** Are you familiar with South African authors? What do you know about them – any stories/ texts/ exposure in schools?

**Reading**

Short Story: “Transforming Moments” by Gcina Mhlope

**Discussion**

**Discussion Facilitation**
- Why do you think the minister invited the protagonist to his family weekend?
- Have you ever experienced a similar feeling to when the protagonist met the praise poet? – in sports, art, etc
- Is it important to have someone believe in you? What do you think of the Revered in the story?
- Why did the protagonist fall in love with herself at the end of the story?
- How did believing in herself change how the protagonist described herself?
- Does anyone have ideas for how they want to use their passions and interests in the future?
- How are the students and women writing for The Family Literacy Project applying themes and messages from “Transforming Moments?”

**Wrap – Up**
- Ask for closing opinions/ thoughts/ questions
- Thank participants
Lesson Plan Day 2

1) Re-Introduction & Warm-up
- One word to describe your mood today
- Ask permission to record
- Thank you's

Learning thinking ideas take place out of the classroom. Any additional ideas or thoughts to share after reflecting on the poems?
- Was it meaningful?
- Is there anything you would change?
- Do you feel like your voice is heard in school? Do you have the opportunity to speak out with your opinions & ideas in English class?

Exercise 1: What words do you associate with a story?
- Call out words as you think of them: hero, climax, magic, bad guys
- What makes a good story?

Contextualize the story: Woman aged 60-70 in Okahandja, Namibia. Learning English. Pass books around before reading.

Q: Is this a good story?
Q: Does this story matter?
Q: Who decides if a story matters?
Q: How does this relate to our conversations about our young poets?
Q: Should your voice & experiences be shared?
Q: Why is it important to read & recognize stories?

5-10 min break

3) Internalize the author: Gcina Mhlope

4) Read the story: Ash group - do you want to read out loud? Have me read or do a mix? - Read aloud

5) Pass out notebooks & pens - explain how writing is one way to record or share, and give value to your voice & ideas
- What are other ways
- How can you use your voice & your brilliance to make a difference?
- Why is it important to give yourself space to speak or write?

How do you feel like you have a voice? Are you comfortable speaking up, sharing?

6) Feedback
- What is the value in reading?
- Are there any barriers to reading - or things you don't like about it?
- Can you tell me about your experiences in English class?
- What did you like about this? What didn't you like about this?
Appendix G: Letter of Gratitude to Participants

Thank you so much for sharing your brilliant thoughts and ideas with me this week! Always remember the words, "I am proud of myself, I trust myself, I believe in me."

-Nosithebenzis'elho Mahlangu
Wishing you all the best in your future!
Sincerely,
Sally