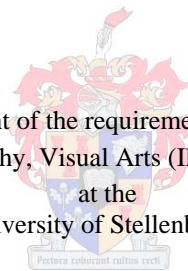


# Growing Letters

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Albertina Christina Petronella Badenhorst

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Supervisor: E Gunter  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
Department of Visual Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Young learners with reading and writing difficulties cannot reach their full potential in school. Teachers, parents and illustrators of children's books cannot assume the efficacy of illustrations as an aid in developing reading skills as a matter of course. Pierre Bourdieu's habitus theory explains perceptual diversity. Illustrations, as varied visual contexts, can be interpreted in different ways and, therefore, also provoke different meanings. The thesis proposes that the young learner should be provided with a diversity of visual stimulants. The thesis proposes that such visual stimulants comprise multiple characterising in illustrated form.

## OPSOMMING

Jong leerders met lees- en skryfprobleme kan nie hul volle potensiaal bereik nie. Onderwysers, ouers en illustreerders van kinderboeke kan nie die effektiwiteit van illustrasies as hulpmiddel in die ontwikkeling van leesvaardighede as vanselfsprekend aanvaar nie. Pierre Bourdieu se habitusteorie verduidelik perseptuele verskille in die registrasie van beeld en teks. Illustrasies, as gevarieerde visuele kontekste kan op verskillende maniere geïnterpreteer word en daarom roep dit verskillende betekenis op. Die tesis stel voor dat die jong leerder variasies in visuele stimulantie behoort te ontvang. Die tesis stel ook voor dat sodanige visuele stimulantie multikarakterisering in geïllustreerde vorm behels.

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## INTRODUCTION

The traditional role of pictures in books is to provide the reader with visual stimulants, which support the process of decoding written text. Picture books seem to be viewed as appropriate for young children or for those who face difficulty in learning to read (Goodwin. 2004: 75).

### **Theme and Scope of Study**

I am intrigued by the difficulty children experience to distinguish between letters. According to Gardner (1979: 31) “most, if not all children, will reverse<sup>1</sup> letters when they first learn to write.”

It is well known amongst parents, teachers and occupational therapists that some children have difficulty in reading, writing or spelling and distinguishing between letters. When a child, after the initial learning phase, continues to struggle with reading and writing skills, it may be so that the child has a learning disability. Some educators and therapists claim that learning disabilities, such as Dyslexia<sup>2</sup>, Dysgraphia<sup>3</sup> or Dyspraxia<sup>4</sup> (Sensory Integration Disorder) already manifest during the initial learning phase. These disabilities affect the self-confidence of a child. Most children who experience reading and writing difficulties tend to label themselves as unable to achieve any goals and find it difficult to accomplish their full potential in school. They are no longer motivated in any field of learning.

Recent studies on children with reading and writing difficulties focus on memory difficulties. While Gardner (1979) focuses on impairment in visual memory, Lucas and

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<sup>1</sup> When children write a letter, it is written with the wrong orientation.

<sup>2</sup> Dyslexia is a type of learning difference that makes it hard for children with this disability to read, spell and write (Hultquist. 2008: 17).

<sup>3</sup> Children struggling with writing skills and handwriting.

<sup>4</sup> Children having difficulty in planning movement to achieve a predetermined idea or purpose (Brookes. 2005: 3).



Lowenberg (1996) focus on the importance of directionality<sup>5</sup>. Frostig and Horne (1964) are of the opinion that reversals are due to a problem in visual perception (position in space) and Orton (1937) propose that reversals are the result of the failure of the dominant hemisphere to properly suppress the non-dominant hemisphere. Children with reading and writing difficulties have also been said to have a dysfunction in the brain.

### **Focus of the Study**

In this study, I focus on illustration as an aid in improving the reading abilities of children. Like all writers and illustrators, authors of children's books write and illustrate mainly to conceptualise through symbols and signs, experiences and the meaning they provoke. These experiences and activities are shared through stories, because books communicate to the public our innermost feelings and ideas (Nodelman. 1988: 109).

Today, many strategies for aiding the ability to distinguish between similar letters, such as "d" and "b", are used. All such strategies incorporate pictures. Pictures are omnipresent. When children start to read, they are given visual stimulants<sup>6</sup> with which they can associate to remember these letters more accurately. Teachers stress distinguishing between letters by evocative images, for example, teachers illustrates the "d" as a door or a donkey and a "b" as a baseball. In children books the pictures are seen as cues to decoding the text. Bear in mind that children are individual beings who learn and respond differently to pictures, stories and experiences. The reading experiences of children with learning disabilities are not only unique to the individual, but can also remain a carefully protected secret. Yet, many factors contribute to reading and writing difficulties and one should not overlook the possibility that past experience, a personal history, affects perception.

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<sup>5</sup> Directionality refers to the knowledge a child has of left and right in space (Smith. 2009: 6).

<sup>6</sup> Visual stimulants are visual imagery that is given to children to form an association in their minds. These stimulants help to improve recognition and association that is perceptually generated in their minds accordingly to their needs and past experiences.

A disposition for preferring pictorial material to text may lead to a child's rejection of reading material that comprises only letters. "While there are many means by which the objects in a picture can be given weight, contextual information is the most significant one" (Nodelman. 1988: 101). Such context, I argue, also addresses and shapes dispositional preferences.

### **Problem statement**

Rather than only relying on a connection between sound and symbol to develop reading ability, would imagery that broaden context visually not also add to the child's understanding of letters?

If children have different preferences for images, my contention is that children should be given various visual images to ensure every child's effective response. *The programme of Study for English in the National Curriculum* (1999: 19) states that at Key Stage 1, "pupils should be taught to respond imaginatively in different ways to what they read". This will give a child the opportunity to associate with a particular image. I also argue that using only letters and pictures would not grant children the opportunity to distinguish between certain letters. Visual imagery must be given more contextual weight, in order to expand association. Children identify with imagery to the extent that they, in their imaginations, create a participative role for themselves in the story. Lastly, I will argue that by linking prior experiences to current experiences, association improves.

### **Question**

For what reason can children not associate with a specific visual image to form a mental representation or association in their minds? Does pre-experience contribute to the forming of associations in durational reading? And finally, can a child who for example, reverses letters, benefit from narrative storytelling and illustrated characterising? How is this achieved?

## **Theoretical framework**

I employ the theories of a number of writers as framework. Firstly, the habitus theory of Pierre Bourdieu underpins the development of my reflections. Here, I provide a brief explanation of the habitus theory. Pierre Bourdieu uses empirical research as the means to ground and develop both theoretical and philosophical insights. Bourdieu brings together “theory, philosophy and empirical work into a seamless whole” (Wainwright. 2000: 9). Bourdieu explains that he portrays, analyses and “take into account the genesis of the person by describing the process of groups, cultures and systems” (Grenfell & James. 1998: 155). Bourdieu’s method reveals a theory for the “dialectical analysis of practical life” (Harker, Mahar & Wilkes. 1990: 3).

Habitus refers to “a structured and structuring structure”, consisting of a “system of schemes generating classifiable practices and works as a system of schemes of perception”, past experience (Bourdieu. 1984: 466) and appreciation (taste) (Bourdieu, 1984: 171). In other words, the habitus refers to different classes that consists of individual ways in which people understand and perceive the world, and the kinds of tastes and preferences that they have. “A habitus tends to produce specific lifestyles” (Haralambos & Holborn. 2008: 68). For example, it will influence with whom people mix, what kind of stories they tell, which books they read, how highly they value education, and so on. Habitus is not permanent and manifests in our daily activities. Each habitus develops from a “position in the structure of the conditions of existence”, in other words, from a socio-economic position (Haralambos & Holborn. 2008: 68). “Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents” (Bourdieu & Wacquant. 1992: 127). “The habitus, therefore, has a structure and it structures the everyday life of individuals” (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008: 68).

Habitus bring together a person’s own knowledge and understandings of the world around him, “which makes a separate contribution to the reality of that world” (Harker, Mahar & Wilkes. 1990: 11). Habitus, for that reason, tends toward “reproducing existing

social structures” (Shilling. 1993: 129). “As the economic position of different groups changes, so will their habitus” (Haralambos & Holborn. 2008: 68). Habitus, therefore, explains the ‘context’ within which we live and operate, and which also informs the framework of our perceptions. As ‘context’, habitus not only informs our perceptions, but also attests to the variability and multiplicity of ‘context’ as concept.

## **Objects of study**

Apart from Bourdieu’s work, I also employ the writings of Susan Engel, Perry Nodelman, Rudolf Arnheim, Donald Woods Winnicot. Engel stresses the essential part stories play in children’s development; whilst Nodelman discusses various ways in which pictures contribute to the narrative effects of picture books. Arnheim studies the forms and functions of art. He asserts that all thinking is basically perceptual in nature. Winnicot, explains the origins of creativity and how it can be developed. Di Goodwin, Jack Zipes and Kieran Egan also contribute to the development of my thinking.

I build my proposition for correcting the reversal of letters on recent material, which include educational picture books, as well as commercial picture books. I also employ my own illustrated children’s books; *Something out of Nothing* and *Lucy’s Growing Letters*. *Something out of Nothing* is an authentic narrative sourced from a South African community that tells the life story of a woman who lost everything. She began exploring her creativity and created *Something out of Nothing*. *Lucy’s Growing Letters* provides children with creative, and often absurd, images, thoughts and experiences to stimulate their imagination and to provoke other ways of thinking. This children’s book comprises the interaction of text, narrative storytelling and characterising, combined with pictorial text, which may improve the reading abilities of children.

## **Aims of the Study**

Picture books are the distinctive medium for children's early reading...Whatever the print locked, powerful literates decree about reading in school, artist and illustrators are in the driving seat in children's encounter with books (Meek. 1998: 118).

I aim to theorise on the above-mentioned illustrated children's book that I created. I aim to determine whether this book can aid in improving the reading abilities of children who struggle learning to read, for example, with the reversal of letters. "Children's books speak to children directly" (Nodelman. 1988: 109). I am interested in investigating whether the context of narrative storytelling and characterisation through pictorial text can assist children. The intent is to propose how to focus on combining pictures, words, narrative characterisation, and specific genres as communicative devices for the improvement of reading ability. By providing children with a children's book<sup>7</sup> that comprise of all these tools, the aim is to find narrative voices or images to which children may respond. The device of combining narrative voice, characterisation and pictorial text to expand context distinguishes my investigation. There are an extreme varieties and diversities of learning experiences that differentiate children's reading. Can narrative storytelling, expanded context, and characterisation help such children to develop a proficiency in reading? Children become involved when they can form analogies between the text and their own experience (Arizpe & Styles. 2003: 57).

This research ultimately rests on the notion that the picture book is an exciting format where text, narrative storytelling and characterising, combined with pictorial text, interact to become a meaningful and influential experience.

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<sup>7</sup> This research focuses on children's books that could be used for educational development, in schools, at home, etcetera. By educational books, I mean books that can be read for pleasure and which also create new experiences with which children can associate, but simultaneously help children to develop proficiency in reading and writing.

## **Chapter Layout**

Chapter 1 initiates an exposition of the broader context of children with reading and writing problems. I provide a view of how children begin to read. What is the origin of reading and writing difficulties and how does this affect these children? More specifically, I analyse why personal history affects perception, and how children associate themselves with images and how this relates to human perception. I investigate the role habitus plays in perception and how its function affects reading and writing skills. I expand this analysis by examining the relationship of image and text and children's association towards pictures and letters, and what brings meaning in a picture book. This chapter underpins later syntheses.

Chapter 2 initiates a study of the broader context of picture books. This investigation will require an exploration of the impact that stories have on children's lives. After scrutinising the output of literature, I observe characterisation, and how this may offer a unique learning opportunity for the improvement of reading ability. I also ascertain how perception can be decomposed into sections comprising imagination and play, and how these terms can contribute to this field of study.

In Chapter 3, a broad discussion around my questions attempts resolution. Here, the outcomes and main findings are proposed.

I propose a different approach to illustrating children's books that aid reading ability.

## CHAPTER 1 – RELATED THEORIES

There is no reason – or indeed excuse – for schools today not to teach all children to read and write (Tran. 2010: 13).

Every experience of a visual image is a formative process; a creative act of integration (Kepes. 1995: 15).

In this section, Chapter 1, I analyse the process of how children begin to read. When looking at a picture, the mind associates<sup>8</sup> images with experience, ideas and emotions. I consider how past experience has an influence on every person's perception, whilst focusing on the fact that difficulty in reading and writing bears no relation to intelligence. Learning disability evolves from perception, entailing the "reception, processing and communication of information" (Kemp, G., Segal, J. & Cutter, D. 2009: [http://helpguide.org/mental/learning\\_disabilities.htm](http://helpguide.org/mental/learning_disabilities.htm)). "Children with learning disabilities have trouble processing sensory information. These children cannot try harder, pay closer attention, or improve their motivation on their own – they need help to learn how to do this" (Kemp, G., Segal, J. & Cutter, D. 2009: [http://helpguide.org/mental/learning\\_disabilities.htm](http://helpguide.org/mental/learning_disabilities.htm)).

Then follows an examination of the relationship between image and text and children's associative actions that link these two elements. I indicate that alphabetic writing is not the only means of communication and that "we need to consider the impact of images on meaning-making" (Goodwin. 2004: 42). In *The Role of Imagery in Learning*, Broudy (1987: 33) expounds on the central role of imagery in children's abilities to develop concepts and skills, particularly in the area of language. In general, pictorial text is viewed as secondary to word. Were this the case, all children would forego the opportunity to expand their learning into the pictorial dimension. Children who are

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<sup>8</sup> Association is a process, a way of thinking, but could be described as imagination of internalising perception and taking what is meaningful, according to the child's past experiences and needs.

better equipped to process information visually rather than verbally are at a serious disadvantage in learning.

Reading and writing skills are both frequently practiced and reinforced throughout the child's school career. By comparison, children do not receive much training in understanding and using visual images (Free. 2004: 9). According to Di Goodwin (2004: 129), it is worthwhile to allow time in school to develop children's visual literacy as a means of demonstrating understanding of the complex meanings enfolded in the written word.

The subject areas listed above are relevant, because they underwrite the central notion that the thesis poses, namely that the combination of pictures, words, and multiple characterisation mediate in children's picture books to develop reading and writing skills.

### **Development of reading and writing**

Children begin to read very early in life, by looking at the pictures, learning that print has meaning, turning the pages in a story book to find out what happens next, "writing" (scribbling or using invented spelling) to communicate a message. Children must learn to combine words on the page with a half-dozen squiggles called punctuation into something – a voice or image in a child's mind that gives back meaning (Kropp. 1996: 3).

Reading orientation starts with incidental reading<sup>9</sup> and the associations it elicits. This already starts at a very early stage in elementary school. From the age of four or five the process of formal incidental reading is initiated. The recognition and identification of certain sounds are crucial and represent the starting point from which reading develops. When children start to read, letters are linked to "abstract sounds called phonemes, which amalgamate and are pronounced as words, in which meaning is realised" (Lyon. 1998: 3). Children learn to recognise certain sounds accidentally through their daily activities. An

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<sup>9</sup> Incidental reading is the reading of images incidentally throughout the day, on billboards, menu's, on the television and games, everywhere.



example of incidental learning of sounds entails, for example, the recognition of a 't' sound. The child forms mental images<sup>10</sup> relating to 't', such as train, tunnel, or table. While creating a mental image, the child learns to remember the image that is associated with the word or letter along with recognising the sound that it generates. This facility increases as the child develops and when formal reading starts, association occurs as a matter of course. Sounds have to be audibly registered before any further progress can be made. Reading cannot occur when sounds are not associated, recognised and identified. Sounds are key elements in the reading process and it is important that the child has the ability to recognise words or letters that are related to the specific sound.

The sensory tactile senses also have a role to play. They help children to learn the relevant sounds. For example, by scratching on a table with one's finger nails, the sound of the scratching makes a 'k' sound. By sufficient repetition of the sound associated with this letter, the child can develop proficiency in identifying and recognising the sound of the 'k' letter. The visual and auditory senses go hand in hand. Stressing the first letter of a word helps the child to associate a certain sound with a symbol, and identical words with the same sound pattern.

The reading activity is characterised by the translation of symbols or letters from print into words and sentences that communicate information and meaning to the child, and in turn they inculcate alphabetic understanding (Adams. 1990: 9).

Alphabet books are used to provide children with images that represent a specific letter to stimulate an associative connection of the two. By providing children with these images, children are informed about the world they live in. Alphabet books offer children a kind of dictionary of visual images (see Figure 1.1) (Nodelman. 1988: 203) paired with letters. G. Reid Lyon (1997: 1) says that children find individual letters on a page abstract and meaningless if they are not accompanied by related pictures.

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<sup>10</sup> Mental imagery is unique images that children generate in their imagination to create a participative role for themselves in the visual or text.

Yet, I argue that alphabetic books are not sufficient for children who struggle with reversal problems, and we need to provide these children with more cognitive tools<sup>11</sup> that stimulate association.

When focusing on children's development, text matters in learning to read (Hoffman & Schallert. 2004: 4). Children need to realise that words are composed of letters. Children undergo several stages of processing and identifying letters and recognising word groupings before they arrive at the meaning of words. (Leipzig. 2001: 264). Only then can children begin to learn that the "written language has its own conventions and rhythms" (Resnick & Snow. 2009: 62).

The practice of learning to read is "closely interlinked" with the development of children's awareness of "words as symbols, separately from what they represent" (Goodwin. 2004: 135). Children learn that texts are constructed, and signify not just things they can see and touch, but ideas and thoughts that are not physical and concrete (Goodwin. 2004: 135). "Words can form imaginary worlds away from the immediate here and now" (Bloch. 1999: 47). Visual images become crucial when teaching a child to read. The child may not be able to read a specific word, but will be able to recognise and identify the meaning of a visual image that accompanies it. By showing a stop sign to children, they recognise the sign and know that it indicates the meaning 'to stop'.

Babies and youngsters observe and store images of their surroundings (Free. 2004: 9). As toddlers, they begin to draw far earlier than they learn the alphabet (Free. 2004: 9). Children learn to read through computer learning programs, which help them to grasp, to form associations, and to remember the characteristics that define these letters. Words on cards in alphabet books illustrate specific letters using key words with associative pictures, such as "a" for apple, "d" for donkey, "b" for bear. Words on walls, puzzles with pictures and sounds, sounds and pictures cut out from magazines provide incidental

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<sup>11</sup> According to Kieran Egan (2005: 219), cognitive tools are for thinking, developed and used to teach children to increase their powers to think and understand.

reading opportunities. People are “bombarded with a plethora of pictorial information on a daily basis” (Free. 2004: 9) and this suggests to us that children too encounter incidental reading opportunities everywhere. The more knowledge children have of the world around them, the more richer and more complex even very simple visual images become (Nodelman. 1988: 106). The twentieth century could be described as an era of visual culture. Images dominate our surroundings. Children see images in the morning when their parents read the newspaper, on cellular phones, on television and cereal boxes; they appear along the road on billboards, on computer screens, and amuse us in movie theatres (Free. 2004: 9). There is also an enormous amount of ‘non-formal’ visual training taking place as children interact with televised images and computer games, where hand-eye coordination and manipulation of manually operated digital technology is learned. This transition to a digital age is accompanied by a resultant non-linear and non-sequential way of experiencing the world.

According to Wendy Free in her study, *Pictures and Words Together: Using Illustration Analysis and reader-generated drawings to improve reading comprehension* (2004), a combination of images and words maximises meaning. Illustrations have helped children to discover and grasp the world around them in exciting, enjoyable and significant ways (Zipes. 2001: 47).

### **Visual perception and past experience**

Children’s reading habits are constantly changing. Children form their reading habits within the context of their immediate environment and lived reality. As they become older and develop their ability to read, their understanding improves and they form preferences accordingly. Children also come into contact with a large amount of visual material through games, computer and televised communication in which abundant amounts of signs and symbols confront them. “This seeks to entice, seduce, govern,

elicit, titillate, provoke, convert, instruct, dictate, implore, warn and delight them. This is called the 'civilising process and acculturation'<sup>12</sup>," (Zipes. 2001: 57).

"Perception cannot be confined to what the eyes record of the outer world" (Arnheim. 1969: 80). As mentioned in the Introduction when referring to Bourdieu, a perceptual act is never isolated. "This is only the most current phase of a stream of innumerable similar acts, performed in the past and surviving in memory" (Arnheim. 1969: 80). What a child experiences in the present is stored in his/her memory, and with the child's past experience, this determines the child's perceptions of the future. The development of the child's understanding of reading material occurs on a symbolic and unconscious level (Dixon. 1977: 95). The mental representation that children create in their minds is where perception is so heavily involved because this representation itself is a perceptual model (Horn. 1996: 2). This perception model weighs heavily where these children create a mental imagery of specific letters or experiences to construct an understanding of the world around them (Horn. 2006: 2).

As mentioned in the Introduction, Bourdieu's habitus theory supports the notion that every person's perception is different because of his/her habitus. The habitus regulates the daily life of individuals (Haralambos & Holborn. 2008: 68). When a child grows older and starts with formal reading, he/she already forms associations and recognises sounds. When a group of children are asked to draw a tree, the outcome gives a remarkable variety of results. The same occurs when children analyse a picture. Such diversity is partly due to individual differences which develop from past experience, culture interests and needs (see Figure 1.2). This phenomenon also expands meaning (Goodenough. 1926: 70).

According to Rudolf Arnheim (1969: 90) the most useful and common interaction between perception and memory takes place in the recognition of observed things. When

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<sup>12</sup> Acculturation denotes the process in which a person is exposed to other cultural behaviour and thinking and absorbs and reaffirms this with his/her already existing perception of the world.

children observe and analyse an experience or visual image, they are able to sense multiple stimuli and they build understanding on the cues they interpret.

William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890: 444) uses the term preperception<sup>13</sup>, in which already stimulated imagery helps to recognise insufficiently explicit perceptual patterns. James shows the traditional mistrust of unaided perception when he asserts that “the only things which we commonly see are those which we preperceive, and the only things which we preperceive are those which have been labelled for us, and the labels stamped into our mind. If we lost our stock of labels we should be intellectually lost in the midst of the world”.

The visual imagery that children create in their minds is especially important (Goodwin. 2004: 132). Remembered images from the past help not only in detecting the context of the character<sup>14</sup> appearing in the visual field, but it also assigns the character a place in the contextual system of things (Arnheim. 1969: 90). Thus almost every perceptual act involves “subsuming a given particular phenomenon under some visual concept and operation, which is most typical of thinking” (Arnheim. 1969: 90).

Visual perception is children’s most important sense. To help children with reading and writing difficulties, visual perception must be used to its fullest. “Visual perception is not a passive recording of stimulus material but an active concern of the child’s mind.” (Arnheim. 1969: 37) For children to recognise objects in visual imagery, constitutes an ability which should obviously precede any real attempt to represent objects by means of pictures. This depends on the child’s ability to form associations by finding similar elements, which are common both to the picture and to the object, despite the dissimilarity of other elements (Goodenough. 1926: 73). Visual images are not simple, since their colours, angles, distortions, shapes, structures, proportions, configurations, “perspectives and many other components hold allusions, associations and overtones

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<sup>13</sup> Preperception is the already stimulated imagery in one’s mind.

<sup>14</sup> In this context a character refers to illustrated characterisation that represents a specific letter, for instance, a dragon character that forms a ‘d’ letter.

which may eventually turn into metaphors and symbols that express a variety of viewpoints” (Schwarcz & Schwarcz. 1991: 2).

“It is true that perception and recognition are inseparably intertwined” (Arnheim. 1969: 91). When a child analyses a visual image, the act requires perceptual processes that extract factual information from the external world. Such factual information helps to develop an answer to the problem with which the child is dealing (Horn. 2006: 2). This means that children’s perception serves a purpose and is selective (Arnheim. 1969: 19). Children scan and explore the visual images with which they come into contact every day, and they select from these images according to their needs. Their eyes work hard to organise and filter the abundance they grasp. Their selections depend on both the strength of visual input and on their mental and emotional engagement (Schwarcz & Schwarcz. 1991: 1).

Perception is what a child knows about a problem and all judgments made are based on his/her perception (Horn. 2006: 3). Childrens' biggest interests will lead to more accurate perception (Nodelman. 1988: 101), for example, every weekend a boy and his father go fishing. When this boy is presented with a visual image of a fish, he will be more capable of seeing subtle visual distinctions in the fish than in a picture of a dog that is shown along with the fish.

“While there are many means by which the objects in a picture can be given weight, contextual information is the most significant one” (Nodelman. 1988: 101). According to Bourdieu’s habitus theory the perception of artistic form is always mediated by socially constructed aesthetic codes (Harker, Mahar & Wilkes. 1990: 152). When children read visual images, these images are limited to a range of possible meanings. A visual image is a cultural object situated in a field of forces. Visual images appear in many contexts and not just in children’s own subjective interest in them. As mentioned, the more knowledge children have of the world, the richer and more complex even very simple visual images come to be (Nodelman. 1988: 103). Children interpret visual images as subsets of the general categories they apply to them. It is the topics in relation to which a

visual image occurs that create a context for its objects. Children's different expectations about the functions (and consequently the significant content) of visual images found in different places also act as an indication of the ways in which we pay attention to them (Nodelman. 1988: 103).

"It is because this world has produced me, because it has produced the categories of thought that I apply to it that it appears to me as self-evident" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 127). As said, a child's perception is influenced by the immediate environment, the milieu in which he/she is situated, things that are experienced, seen and heard. For example, a child is playing on the playground when a leaf suddenly falls off the tree. "Aha", he thinks, "It is raining leaves". Another child, the moment the leaf falls on his head happily thinks: "It is like playing with Joe, when we build a tree house of leaves." A third child would watch the leaf fall, "How happily this leaf swifts along, like it is a dancer" (Schwarcz & Schwarcz. 1991: 1). Habitus includes a child's "own knowledge and understandings of the world, which makes a separate contribution to the reality of that world" (Harker, Mahar & Wilkes. 1990: 11). According to Russel and Nagaishi (2005: 264), "vision is the process of taking in, processing, and integrating visual and other sensory information to form a perception." What each child invents is influenced by what he/she reads, sees, hears or feels (Goodwin. 2004: 112). If a child is accustomed to only a limited number of perceptions, the child is hardly likely to perceive a vision of anything beyond his/her limited perception. Rudolf Arnheim (1969: 90) states that the mind cannot give shape to the shapeless. That is why, when children start to read, they are given visual stimulants to recognise and form associations and these in turn feed their perception with more ideas and cues. More exposure gives rise to a broader vision. Perceptions are already recorded from birth. These perceptions expand throughout childhood, and while perception grows, the individual child begins to understand other people's visions and perceptions.

## **The relationship between pictures and words**

“Language is not a scientific description”, but rather serves daily communication, “in which people are ordered, advised and persuaded and in which they listen, obey and become angry” (Harker, Mahar & Wilkes. 1990: 177). Visual language functions on the same basis. “The language of vision, optical communication, is one of the strongest potential means to reunite man and his knowledge and to re-form man into an integrated being” (Kepes. 1995: 13). Visual literacy is an ability and must be learned just like reading and writing (Mackenzie. 2003: 4).

The amalgamation of word and image is part of the twenty first century’s multimedia-rich world in which all children nowadays grow up (Goodwin. 2004: 132). Children are exposed to different types of printed material; story-books with a variety of pictures, books with large print or small print, non-fiction books, magazines, alphabet books with alphabet letters and words that begin with a specific letter, cartoons, rhyme books and children’s Bibles, legends, fables, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, chapbooks, poetry, toy books, didactic stories, penny novels, picture books and the like. The most successful children’s “books seem to be those in which the unity on a higher level”<sup>15</sup> emerges from visual images and texts which are “noticeably fragmentary” that are different from each other, and are significant parts of the “meaning of the whole” (Nodelman. 1988: 200).

According to Perry Nodelman (1988: 1), when children analyse a visual text, “the relationship between word and image places demands on what are often called higher order reading skills”; style, inference, point of view, and so forth. These characteristics involve thinking that is full of meaning. In a children’s book, style can convey much about the mood and atmosphere. Most of the narrative information that illustrations provide emanates from the specific character depicted, not just what they are, but how

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<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes (1975: 107) states that many picture books – indeed possibly all of the best ones – do not just reveal that pictures show us more than words can say, but they achieve what Barthes calls “unity on a higher level” by making the difference between words and pictures a significant source of pleasure.



they relate to each other. The illustrated characterisation<sup>16</sup> become meaningful through the context<sup>17</sup> that the illustrator provides and that the readers evoke. What the readers evoke relate to their general knowledge and experience of life.

In a children's book, the two different communication devices, i.e. text and image, "work together to create a form unlike any other" (Nikolajeva & Scott. 2006: 2) and these are learned spontaneously by experience (Schwarcz & Schwarcz. 1991: 4). Nodelman (1988: 193) explains when she reads to children the text of childrens' book stories without the accompanying visual images, these children often misunderstand the implications of the words they hear. Through this experience Nodelman reveals much about the different ways in which words and pictures contribute to the total effect of a children's book narrative. A children's book is not just an experience that is revealed, it is a process and a way of making things happens to words and to pictures to attract new meaning and interpretations.

"Children's books have a dual function, an ability to look in two directions at once and playing off the two perspectives against each other" (Arizpe & Styles. 2003: 56). Pictures and words need not, and often should not, say the same thing. In *Lily takes a walk*, by Satoshi Kitamura, Lily likes to go for walks with her dog, Nicky. She is not afraid, because Nicky, her dog, is with her, while she strolls through the town she looks at all the beautiful flowers. Nicky, the dog, is terrified because everywhere he turns are monsters, their eyes visible in streetlight and dinosaurs appear in ponds. Pictures show how characters appear, what they are doing and the setting in which they move, and to some extent show us what the characters are feeling. In *Lily takes a walk* the pictures reach beyond the text and also contradict it (see Figure 1.4). The illustrations change the narrative impact of words (Nodelman. 1988: 196) and actually change the meanings of the text. These illustrations reveal information that the texts do not. Pictures use all

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<sup>16</sup> Illustrated characterisation is a letter that is illustrated to form a specific character, and is useful for my proposed children's book.

<sup>17</sup> When referring to context in this dissertation, it is the space and circumstances in which an illustrated characterisation is situated.

aspects of visual imagery to provide the child with narrative information about the characters they depict (Nodelman. 1988: 106).

Words and pictures in children's books are not so totally separable (Nodelman. 1988: 198) and this contributes to my statement that alphabet books are not sufficient for children struggling with reading and writing problems. In a children's book, words locate time, while the illustrations define space. The words generalise and reveal what characters are saying or thinking (Goodwin. 2004: 55) and can easily focus our attention (Nodelman. 1988: 198). The cause of this is the writers of textual description of images tend to discard what is visually obvious. Children learning to distinguish between letters by reading alphabet books will not learn from just letters and an accompanying picture. Children need to be given books that the visual images and text amalgamate in a story, where the "plot is a unified sequence of causes and effects", and the events are communicated in a pattern (Nodelman. 1988: 198). Through this the temporal relationships of the visual images and text make the experience a story (Nodelman. 1988: 198) of unconscious learning and reveal different letters that become characters for association to entice.

The visual images in a children's book communicate information that gives a different effect and meaning to the story as a whole, as seen in *Lily takes a walk*. These changes can take place because of the different ways in which words and pictures communicate. "Children's books provide a wide scope of artistic devices for characterisation, and some children's books show a remarkable level of sophistication in this respect." (Nikolajeva & Scott. 2006: 82). The way a character's behaviour is expressed in action and by direct and indirect speech, reveals dimensions of this character in a very immediate way. A good picture-book like *Lily takes a walk*, does not tell us that Lily the girl wears an orange and red striped top, or the colour of Lily's eyes and hair and neither is the species of the flower mentioned in the text. This information is presented through the visual images. In picture books that tell stories, like *Lily takes a walk*, the texts are characteristically succinct and undetailed. The texts are reliant upon the accompanying visual images for their specific meaning (Nodelman. 1988: 1).

Children are fascinated with both the words and visual images that confront their eyes when they open a children's book. As Di Goodwin (2004: 58) says, text and visual images go hand in hand. The creative energy a children's book possesses lies not with the illustrations alone, it is the way the text and the visual images are combined that make it successful (Lewis. 2001: 36). Both visual image and text are essential to a child, and one without the other would change or diminish the overall experience, if not change the story entirely (Goodwin. 2004: 75).

## **Meaning**

The soul of teaching has to do with meaning. It has been recognized that the task of teaching is not simply to teach facts and skills that can be reproduced when required. The trick is to tie the facts and skills to their deeper meaning in human experience (Egan. 2005: 211).

“An important function of education is to enrich the everyday environment with meaning, and to uncover wonder in what is commonly taken for granted.” (Egan. 2005: 58). This aspect is very important when it comes to teaching children to distinguish between letters. Meaning enables these children to enlarge and enrich their perceptions of the world and their understanding of their experiences (Egan. 2005: 58) and this will help with recognition of letters.

In a children's book, the different levels of meanings allow children to see that there is a lively flow between the author and the child listening to the story and between what is contained in the text and what is evoked by the text (Engel. 1999: 80). Children's books characteristically communicate on diverse aesthetic levels; they employ metaphoric and symbolic expression, and their contents could be interpreted in various ways. This may lead to the disclosure of previously concealed meanings or to new meanings acquired over time (Schwarcz & Schwarcz. 1991: 5). As Barbara Rogoff (1990: 38) indicated in her research on young children's cognitive development, how and what a child thinks while reading a book, depends on how that child has constructed the meaning of the

relevant activity (Engel. 1999: 76). Children are able to understand stories through their relationship with the narrator, their textual characteristics, and the different layers of meaning the story reveal (Engel. 1999: 84).

Meaning is most important in a narrative (Engel. 1999: 64) and by relating characters, actions, objects, place and time, the author conveys meaning. Part of that meaning is conveyed by the story's perspective or point of view (Engel. 1999: 18). According to Wallace Chafe<sup>18</sup> (1980: 79), "narratives are overt manifestations of the mind in action: as windows to both the content of the mind and its ongoing operations". An illustration adds considerable meaning to the text. Among other things, it provides the child some information as to what certain words mean (Hoffman & Schallert. 2004: 5). "As soon as words and images provide alternative information or contradict each other in some way", as mentioned in relation to *Lily takes a walk*, we are confronted by "a variety of readings and interpretations" (Nikolajeva & Scott. 2006: 17). Words and illustrations actually communicate two different stories from two different points of view (Nikolajeva & Scott. 2006: 18).

Nodelman (1988) repeatedly states that the meaning in a picture book is revealed only through the interaction of words and pictures, but on the whole the focus is primarily on the visual aspects. William Ivins (1953: 15) join Noldeman and adds to this that text cannot communicate explanatory information as easily as visual images can. According to Nodelman in *The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (1988: 202) words are the separable parts of a sentence. Only by understanding parts first are children able to begin to understand language. Visual images are different, when children analyse a visual image they see all at once and only then they begin to notice various parts that have some meaning. Children's understanding of language starts with details and moves toward wholes. For example, children must first learn the alphabet and then move to words. Children's understanding of visual images starts with wholes and breaks down into detail.

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<sup>18</sup> Wallace Chafe, analysed the stories people of different cultures told in response to seeing *The Pear Stories*, a short silent movie he made.

According to research cited by the educational psychologist Jerome Bruner of New York University (2006), the average person remembers only 30 percent of what is read, but nearly 80 percent of what is seen. Visual language is capable of disseminating knowledge more effectively than almost any other vehicle of communication (Watson, M. 2006: <http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/when-words-and-images-collide.html>).

The perception children generate of letters and words are informed by the meaning and word order of letters and words before them. Children have the freedom to pick their way, perceive contents and meanings at their discretion, with no prescribed direction (Schwarcz & Schwarcz, 1991: 4). This is where the problem lies, since children who experience some difficulty learning to read and write need to be given visual ideas that also add meaning to words. These children have to be fed with specific ideas and cues because of the association that is not taking place.

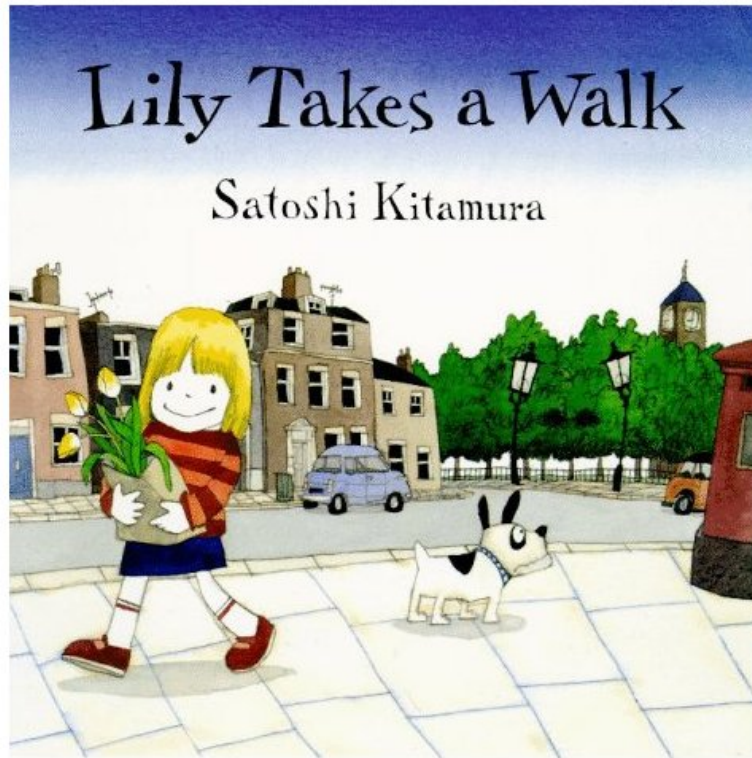
In conclusion, this chapter has outlined the orientation of how children see pictures and form associations. It commenced with an overview of how children start to read and then continued with a discussion on why past experience influences a child's perception. Through the discussion of the literature in this chapter it was revealed that children form associations and conceptual mental representations in their mind. When they observe a picture or read a story with visual imagery present, they accordingly assimilate what is important to them and discard the rest.



**Figure 1.1** (a) (top left) Illustration by Martin Jarrie, *ABC USA* (2005). Collection: Gericke Library, University of Stellenbosch. (b) (top right) Illustration by Martin Jarrie, *ABC USA*, see above for details (Jarrie. 2005: 16, 20).

**Figure 1.2** (bottom) Illustrations by Children from C.R. Swart Primary School (2010). Collection: CR Swart Primary School.





**Figure 1.3** (left) Illustration by Satoshi Kitamura, *Lily takes a Walk*, (1987 republished in 1998). Collection: Private (Kitamura. 1987).

## CHAPTER 2 – PICTURE BOOKS AS COGNITIVE TOOLS

According to Allan Luke (1998: 2) literacy-related problems encountered by students and teachers in classrooms can be resolved by finding the right method of teaching.

Chapter 2 comprises a broad discussion that incorporates different cognitive tools, which could hopefully enhance children's ability to distinguish between letters. The notion of similarity and difference in languages and the relationships between words, sounds and pictures, as described in Chapter 1, are the keys to developing formal language skills. I will add another aspect, and accentuate the importance of stories. My goal is to address the contextual orientation of stories and why these stories that people tell are important. "Children's learning is not compartmentalised. They learn when they forge connections between experiences and ideas that are related to any aspect of life in the school setting, at home and in the community" (DfEE. 2000: 45). According to the IERG<sup>19</sup> (2008: [http://ierg.net/lessonplans/cognitive\\_tool\\_theory.php?tool\\_id=15](http://ierg.net/lessonplans/cognitive_tool_theory.php?tool_id=15)), "in the past, developing the tool of narrative tended to receive less attention than developing logical skills, which are seen to be more productive."

Within this context, I also reflect on characterisation<sup>20</sup>, which may be seen as the most important contribution to reading proficiency. I refer to characters that play central roles in the story, for example a boy or a girl. The most crucial aspect, alphabet letters that are commonly reversed, will also be developed through characterisation. In doing so, I refer to the letters of the alphabet as inhabitants of an imaginary world that become characters. For example, a 'd' will become a dragon in the imaginary world of childlike character who also inhabits the story. These childlike characters will be referred to as 'letter characters'. Children with reading and writing difficulties tend to escape reality through an imaginary world where they can conjure up their own story and experiences.

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<sup>19</sup> The Imaginative Education Research Group

<sup>20</sup> Characterisation functions to reveal the thought, feeling, words and actions of the character to the reader. The character develops through the story and the reader gets to know the character better. This causes the character to become more realistic to the reader, and the reader can form part and associate with the character's experiences.



Imagination and play become tools that improve reading ability. Through this tool children are unconsciously exposed to new ways of thinking and imagining, and if they can associate with the absurd and unusual experiences that the stories relate, they will remember the letters more easily. However children themselves need to play with this tool in order to explore ideas fully and creatively.

### **Why stories matter**

Good picture books offer us what all good art offers us: greater consciousness  
– the opportunity, in other words, to be more human (Noldeman. 1988: 258).

### **The language of creative education**

Current research shows that children do not recall complex episodes from their past experience. The reason for this may be attributable to the fact that without language children has no means of constructing their past experiences (Engel. 1999: 27). “As humans we need to use and develop language, for this is in itself one of our basic needs, a practice we cannot do without. It is a primary form of life” (Nietzsche. 1927: 422). Language is not just a form of words; it is part of the way in which children actualise their hopes, plans, dreams and ambitions. Language is a tool of domination (Bourdieu. 1982: 68) and is necessary for any thought whatsoever (Nietzsche. 1927: 402).

“Language is universal because children actually reinvent it, generation after generation, not because they are taught, not because they are generally smart, not because it is useful to them, but because they cannot do otherwise” (Pinker. 1994: 32). This would suggest that creative invention is innate rather than taught. Creative invention is constantly present in every child’s daily activities of playing, doing homework or enjoying a book. These activities are actually being used for creative thinking to take shape and form (Winnicott. 1971: 93).

I propose, therefore, that illustrated narratives can be used as tools for improving literacy-related problems through an exciting and imaginative act of playing, where unconscious learning takes place. According to Kieran Egan (2005: 100), logical skills need the development of narrative tools and cannot reach full proficiency individually. Being able to follow a narrative is crucial for efficient learning and understanding of almost any subject in school. It also enhances our manipulation and deployment of possibilities, which is what enables children to use what they have learned in one context and apply it in another context (Egan. 2005: 100).

Every individual person handles his/her circumstances and experiences in a different way. These experiences are the spoken or written accounts of experiences that structure stories (Engel. 1999: 154). Children tell their stories in their own way and transcend their own accentuation, medium and language to this experience. “Stories balance a relationship among author, text and audience” (Engel. 1999: 81). The way in which a child expresses the style, genre, thoughts, feelings, emotions, shapes, highlights, colours, events and ideas of a story being told, reveal a lot about each child as an individual. Engel (1999: 14) explains that stories give body to our own experience and take us beyond the confinements of everyday life, into the past, the future and the might be.

Children learn from stories. Stories reveal an inventory of the world’s events and circumstances which include sad, happy or funny events and this information feeds a child’s perception of life. Children can assimilate what is of use to them from these stories and convert it to some kind of meaning in their lives. Stories are of vital importance when they collaborate with the development of children. A child’s experiences contribute to the life story of the child (Engel. 1999: 14). Stories have a big impact on “shaping what children feel, think, react to and know about their lives” (Engel. 1999: 5). The reason why stories are everywhere during childhood - on television, read by teachers and parents, heard over the radio in the supermarket and on the way home in the car - is that, through stories, children construct themselves. Engel (1999: 9) explains that narratives are the form in which children organise experiences, and those stories, or

the outlines of stories, guide and form not only their memories, but also an experience of what is happening and what may happen in future.

Children can associate more easily with experiences that form part of their already existing images of the world. Recent studies show that the personal meaning of already generated perception affects children's recall of those remembered events (Engel. 1999: 64). When a child reads a book that includes an experience he/she can recall from past experience, association becomes simple. It is not what the child remembers that shapes an experience and the sense of who he/she is, it is also how a child remembers it (Engel. 1999: 13). "The past is useful for clarifying or adding to the present" (Engel. 1999: 142).

Children tell stories wherever they go, at home in the classroom or while playing. This is when children start to join in each other's stories and reveal their individuated experiences of the same event. For example<sup>21</sup>, Jason came to school one day and brought a photograph of a big fish with him that he and his father caught. While showing his photograph to his teacher, the other children in the class joined in. One boy talked about a fish that he caught one day that was even bigger than Jason's fish. The way children talk about their past differs from one child to the next (Engel. 1999: 143). When a child had an experience that was good or bad, the personal experience become part of the story told. "The two levels of reality are merged" (Engel. 1999: 87). A child will also retell a story by incorporating his/her interest into the story, and thus it becomes part of a narrative (Engel. 1999: 133). From three years of age children are fairly capable of telling stories with others and even on their own. According to Engel (1999: 193), while children are still affirming that they existed in the past and that that past itself is related to their current self, they are also branching out, focusing more on the themes, emotional tone and details of stories.

Children must be given different ways to develop their imagination and thinking, which will enhance the ability to form associations. According to Di Goodwin (2004: 49), a

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<sup>21</sup> The examples used in this dissertation emanate from a real class environment. My mother is a Grade R teacher and I had the opportunity to observe the children in her class.

creative curriculum is a tautology; it is how we interpret it that is creative. She also states that children need to interpret and try out new meanings for language in its entire social context. Stories are ubiquitous and are “vehicles of entertainment of enlightenment and of humanisation” and attract children by their amazement, surprises, playfulness, illustrations, optical illusions, detail and messages in configurations. Children are attracted by the shapes, colour, size or layout and attractive illustrations of books (Schwarcz & Schwarcz. 1991: 3).

We see that children use stories to guide and shape the way they experience their daily lives. They utilise stories to communicate and play with other children, and to develop relationships with them. Children incorporate experience into their self-conception (Engel. 1999: 55). For example, Divan, four years old, came to school one morning in a very earnest mood. He said to his teacher: “I am the person who broke my knee and now I can’t play rugby anymore”. Another example is Stephan, seven years old, who came to class after going away on a long weekend, and told his teacher: “I am the person who jumped off a waterfall and swam in the river”. A child conjures up stories about something that may have happened to him/her or to another person to become part of his/her own social world. Through this, children construct parts of their world, reaffirm who they are and convey that sense of self to others (Engel. 1994: 25).

Stories are portraits that you can stand back from and integrate with other stories. The reader or listener can change it, admire it, recall specific feelings associated with it, and share it with others. Yet each time a story is told it also becomes a text, and therefore, an object for reflection. A piece of information or view of oneself becomes available for you to think about and integrate with other views of one self (Engel. 1999: 188).

Every culture group has its own way of expressing joy and managing grief (Haralambos & Holborn. 2008: 68). According to Frederick Bartlett (1932: 12), “remembering is a social process”. Not only is the structure of narrative shaped by cultural forces, but children respond to a cultural style and tone and they are attracted by the unusual in language (Engel. 1999: 81). The way a story is expressed, emphasised, conveyed and

coloured, shape not only what each child will remember of the relevant experience, but also how each child will associate with the experience (Engel. 1999: 186).

The cognitive psychologist, Ulrich Neisser (1988: 16), argued that “an important type of self-knowledge that we construct and refer to daily is the extended self, being the self-made images or stories of oneself in the past and the future”. For example, over the weekend Stephan’s father caught thieves in their backyard. Stephan, who is four years old, came to school and told his own version of the story. “There were thieves in the middle of the night at our house, they broke the windows and I saw them. Luckily my father had a gun, and they ran away”. As the British psychologist, Frederic Bartlett (1932: 197) explains, when children recall stories and events, they change the stories in certain predictable ways. They blend, condense, omit, and invent elements.

As children grow and become older, their skills change and grow recursively. Children’s interests and concerns change by incorporating old interests and concerns. Their friends, groups, milieu, habits and their ways of relating to the outside world also change (Engel. 1999: 190). As mentioned before, habitus is not fixed and unchanging. The form in which the memory is expressed when association is taking place reflects back to past experiences and in terms of culture, social organisation and cultural priorities. Children “experience their lives as a series of overlapping and fluctuating stories” (Engel. 1999: 9). This explains how children become part of their cultural environment.

When children tell stories which comprise of past experiences, these stories “are powerful tools for managing social relations” (Engel. 1999: 49). When a mother and her child are reading a book of a dog playing in the park, mothers usually will make use of references to past experiences while reading the book. An example is, “It is like the one we saw when we visited Grandma”. Creating visual images is claimed to improve comprehension by linking prior experiences to new ideas, thus building richer schemata (Gibson. 2004: <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/22800>). It is the job of a novelist to shape human experiences so that a reader might be able to find not only order, but also meaning in a story. Children respond to literature in terms of their stimulated

experiences in their minds and understanding of literary conventions (Goodwin. 2004: 66).

I propose a narrative that collaborates with the flow of young children's talk and search for language that describes experiences (Engel. 1999: 70). Children must be provided with stories that enhance their ability to learn in ways that make it possible to think differently and imagine unusual things. Margaret Donaldson suggests in her seminal work, *Children's Minds* (1978: 156), children's development must be projected to enable children to learn and think in ways that do not necessarily make "human sense". Engel (1999: 185) explains that early language and experience allows children to convey what they have experienced with unusual directness. For children the distinction between reality and unreality is blurred and, therefore, they scarcely have to suspend belief. Stories that capture the flow of experience in time and space are perhaps the most essential symbolic process enabling us to experience ourselves.

## **Genre**

In this section I expand my reflection within the context of the above and also consider the notion of specific genres in illustrated children's books.

Jon Stott (1994: 12), referring to the value of literature for children, sees the teaching of the reading of literature as a developmental process. Specific stories can be chosen not only for their literary merit but also for introducing, developing or reinforcing response skills. The simplest and sunniest, but also the most serious and complex experiences and themes are being treated in picture books in aesthetically, psychologically and educationally satisfying fashions.

There are two stages in which people live their lives: experiences and the retelling of those experiences. As Lev Vygotsky (2005: 202) pointed out so eloquently, the acquisition of language gives us a second world beyond the word of immediate action:

In the absence of words, humans would have to deal only with those things which they could perceive and manipulate directly. With the help of language, they can deal with things which they have not perceived even indirectly and with things which were part of the experience of earlier generations. Thus, the word adds another dimension to the world of humans. Humans have a double world.

Stories occupy the second level of experience. Through stories children escape the reality of the moment and change and imagine a story as they want it to be. As explained in the Introduction, Bourdieu states: “social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents.” The world consists of two parts, the world of action and objects and the world of stories is what make each child’s experience unique. Each of these worlds shapes the other, organises the child’s perception of actions and objects (Engel. 1999: 6). Children’s perception of actions and objects inform their stories as seen in, *The Bear with the Sword*, by Davide Cali (2008). Bear was very proud of his sword, it was very sharp and very powerful and bear loved nothing more than to cut things with this sword. The bear's sword could cut through any object, and to prove how strong it was, the bear began cutting everything he could see, including slashing the whole forest down. One morning a huge flood destroyed his fortress and this bear wanted to seek revenge, only to learn that the sequence of events, as the animals of the forest were displaced, were of his own doing. Putting his sword down and taking responsibility, the bear found some new friends (see Figure 2.1). *The Bear with the Sword* is a parable that allows children to grasp the concept of actions having consequences.

In this way, children’s books help children to understand everyday life, different circumstances, realities and certain problems. In my work, *Something out of Nothing* (2009), children are provided with ideas to be innovative and think out of the box (see Figure 2.2). As Engel (1999: 173) states, “a narrative is never only the expression of another’s consciousness and identity; the speaker speaks through the voices of others. In this way the narrative is always a social construction”. As I mentioned before when focusing on children’s development, the key is to construct narratives that form part of

children's play and conversation (Engel. 1999: 20). As seen in *The Sam books* by Barbro Lindgren and illustrated by Eva Eriksson, books focus on one problem, or rather one object, which features in the title, for example: *Sam's Potty* (1986), *Sam's Cookie* (1981), *Sam's Ball* (1982) (see Figure 2.3). These books capture the troubles of today's youth and portray everyday situations with which any child can easily recognise and associate. Goodwin (2004: 112) states that "the need to make emotional connections, to explain events and experiences is part of what it is to be human. Stories help us to do this".

Children want to be made aware of "the people and world around them and they want to know more about their relationship with them" (Duffy. 1998: 8). A child becomes naturally curious when he/she sees that another child has different eyes or hair colour. In my children's book *Something out of Nothing*, children are informed about the culture and milieu in which Shara has grown up. Through Shara's actions and the way her circumstances are revealed, children become aware of other culture groups. The town houses, tuck-shop and chickens provoke some sort of meaning within this children's book and capture a part of their environmental lifestyle (see Figure 2.4(a) and (b)).

Carol Feldman (1989: 176) argues that different narrative genres constitute different "epistemic forms", or ways of knowing to the extent that narrative is a way of understanding human action. One can take different interpretive stances towards narratives. In *Something out of Nothing*, Shara lost her job at the local hospital. Shara was so sad that she cried for several days (see Figure 2.5(a) and (b)). She cried so much that the village started to flood. Children will react differently to this experience, some children will be angry with Shara because of her crying that almost flooded the town, while other children will pity Shara.

According to Whitehead (1997: 94), "the ability to place ourselves in the centre of a story, by relating to circumstances and by associating oneself with the character, is a valuable start to becoming a reader and writer". Stories reflect numerous intensities and levels of our experience (Engel. 1999: 7). Children are the stories they tell, and their perception and memories of past experiences are what give them a history and a sense of



whom they are – past, present and future (Engel. 1999: 14). For example, years ago there was a television programme, titled “Flash”. The character Flash was fast. Every time one of his legs moved forward he started to move very quickly. He was so fast that one could not see him move. One boy believed that he himself was Flash. The teacher had to call him Flash. He didn’t respond on any other name. He ran to his table, to the bathroom, everywhere, because he was Flash. The teacher could not tell him to stop running everywhere, because he *was* Flash, and he *had* to move like a flash. “Observation in itself is less important than the relationships observed” (Goodenough. 1926: 71). When children read a book and temporarily merge with a character of their preference, they add dimension to their personality and identity (Engel. 1999: 55). Rosenblatt (1978: 14) underlines the importance of children making personal connections in their reading, with the text or with a character. Such connections enable children to draw on their own experience.

Children’s books that incorporate children’s experience and that address certain problems (Zipes. 2001: 44), such as learning disabilities, might be a solution in the form of a child’s narrative voice accompanied by pictorial text. The learner might respond more readily to such a book, since children frequently use personal analogies to try to understand the feeling of “characters or animals in books. Often their responses are more sympathetic and thoughtful” (Arizpe & Styles. 2003: 225), and therefore might also elicit empathy.

Children do not only reconstruct experience and communicate experience through stories, but stories are experiences in themselves. Children place themselves in different “experiences as a way to explore who they are and who they are not. Part of who a child is”, is the character or person he/she imagines being (Engel. 1999: 55). For example, a boy, in his imagination, had a lion on a leash. The lion came along to school every day, and sat under his table. He pretended that the lion was really alive. If the lion was angry on any specific day, the teacher knew that something had happened at home or that something was wrong. According to Engel (1999: 42), “the telling and retelling of emotionally significant incidents allow children to work through experience in several

ways”. Parents are unaware of the emotional impact stories have on children. Stories can help children acquire some sense of comfort and mastery, as seen in *My Name Is Brain Brian*<sup>22</sup> (1993) (see Figure 2.6) by Jeanne Betancourt. This is a true story based on the author’s experience of a boy with a great deal of confusion and frustration when he noticed that he was different from the other kids. He did not seem to be able to read and write properly and he continually reversed the letters when writing. The reader then enters Brian’s world and empathises with his struggle to understand that he is not the only one with this problem and that he can ultimately fulfil his potential. These examples reflect the emotional turmoil and consequent transformation children endure.

Characters in a narrative tend to guide children in the right direction for handling difficulties. Children resolve their emotional problems by telling their own stories (Engel. 1999: 42). Stories regulate emotional experience and function to help children to make sense of things (Egan. 2005: 80). Children with reading and writing problems do not like books and their participation in class become poorer as a result. These circumstances may lead to a child’s enduring sense of either autonomy or shame and doubt (Engel. 1999: 188). Stories can be used to make children aware of their different environments and emotions, thereby helping them to emerge from their isolation (Engel. 1999: 43).

Children are interested in reality, and engage with the imaginations of writers and illustrators when they become fluently literate (Egan. 2005: 85). Jerome Bruner (1990: 21) says “that literacy comes into its full power as a road to the redefinition of reality”.

We do need to give children plenty of forms and voices to inhabit or borrow. These forms can be introduced in a way that encourages rather than suppresses the development of more individual kinds of story construction (Engel. 1999: 171).

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<sup>22</sup> This story book contains no images, and is used as an example to illustrate the emotional impact stories can have on children.

If children with learning difficulties tend to isolate themselves, it means that nobody hears their stories, and therefore cannot know their emotions and experiences. This notion also defines a gap in illustrated children's books that is there for the taking. This gap entails breaking through the child's isolation caused by his/her reading disability. There are stories that highlight a child's isolation, as in *My name is Brain Brian* by Jeanne Betancourt and in *Just call me Stupid* (1993), by Tom Birdseye. *Lucy's Growing Letters* illustrates the experience of children with reading and writing problems. The main character, Lucy, struggles with reading and writing difficulties. This story combines pictures and characterisation in order to stimulate unconscious learning. As Jerome Bruner (1990: 80) suggested, making experience meaningful involves interpreting it. While revealing the difficulties these children experience with reading, the illustration also reveals varied options of characterisation. This provokes an association with these characters. Children interpret these narratives as different versions of experiences. The crucial point is that durable associations form. While a father and his son are looking at pictures from their fishing trip, they are reliving an experience important to them. Both of them relive this experience in different ways depending on the strength of their involvement or on its pertinence to their subsistence or to their mental and emotional lives. The child is learning what goes into an evocative description of past experience. At the same time, the boy and his father is re-experiencing themselves in ways that highlight certain characteristics of their life (Engel. 1999: 193). The content of children's stories is usually explained as reconstructions or communications of personal experience, as happens in *Lucy's Growing Letters*. "The expression of emotional concerns and interests are attempts to make cognitive and affective sense of the world" (Engel. 1999: 174).

According to Engel (1999: 156) it is easy for parents to forget how intoxicating it is for a child to discover that everything has a name, that words can be put together in almost infinite combinations to mean new things. In *Lucy's Growing Letters* children are introduced to a plethora of visual images comprised of letters that also become characters. Each of these characters reveals their own story and experiences. This children's book serves as a vehicle of new discovery, which children will relate to. In

this children's book, letters and pictures are put together to stimulate the child's evocation of different thoughts.

*Lucy's Growing letters* only focuses on letters that tend to be reversed; 'b', 'd', 'p', 'q', 'g', 'f' and 'v'. These letters are presented as different characters (see Figure 2.7). The letter 'p' is presented as a pirate and a parrot. More 'p' characters will be revealed further in *Lucy's Growing Letters* as potato, priest, palace, palm tree, pony, palm, parrot, pigeon, poodle, pasta, paw, plumber, pea, peacock, peanut, pear, pearl, pilot, pig, pipe, pumpkin, phone, pirate, plane, pizza en puppet. The reader meets a variety of a 'p' characters, and the same happens with the 'b', 'd', 'q', 'g', 'f' and 'v'. Each of these characters represents a letter, which takes the shape of a number of characters.

### **Characterisation**

In *Lucy's Growing Letters*, I draw from the previous experiences of others and of my own, to turn reading it into an *experience* for children that have a difficulty with reading and writing (Benjamin. 1968: 87). Using narrative storytelling and illustrated characterising I invite the reader into the narrative space beneath the design (Morris. 1997: 65). I encourage the reader to identify with the story through elements of composition and illustrated characterisation, events and experiences.

A character in a book is usually developed through revealing specific actions, appearance, thoughts, words and feelings described in the text. In *The water fight* (1989) by Roderick Hunt (see Figure 2.8(a) and (b)), the reader is only provided with key sentences that accompany the rich and colourful illustrations. In *The water fight*, as in most picture books, it is significant also to focus on the imagery, which provides more clues (Johnson. 2009: 70). On page 5 (see Figure 2.8(a)), it is revealed that the boy standing aside, with his hand in his pants, is up to something, conjuring up some plans in his head. On the next page (see Figure 2.8 (b)), the boy pushed his sister and brother into the paddling pool, revealing what his thoughts and game were. As revealed through this book, a character's appearance, size and placement on the page and how he/she interacts

spatially with other characters, can convey a great deal about their status, mood changes and relationships (Johnson. 2009: 70)

Characterisation within a narrative should not only be lively, but also should display diversity. In *Lucy's Growing Letters*, Lucy sits in class, scared that the teacher will ask her a question. When Misses Morris asks Lucy to say to the class what the letter is on the board, Lucy escapes reality into an imaginary world. The black board in her class begins to break open and all of her class friends turn into all kinds of animals. Lucy is surprised when this happens. Misses Morris then gives 'quack' to her to go and explore 'letters land'. Lucy is very excited. When they fly to 'g' and 'p' land, 'quack' flies into a palm tree and breaks his wing. Lucy is sad and scared, because she does not know what to do, but she tries to help 'quack' by climbing up the giant's leg. She tries to get grapes for 'quack' at the palace garden, so that he can get better. Lucy is very brave, and climbs and climbs. Lucy projects different reactions and emotions, which help the reader to come to know Lucy better (see Figure 2.9).

When a familiar experience is turned into a story, it allows children to think about their past, even when they have no intention of sharing those thoughts with anyone (Engel. 1999: 26). In *Loeloe en die tandmuis* (1990), by Mart Meij, (prescribed reading book for Grade 2s), Loeloe, the girl, refers to her past experiences when she thinks about what she is going to do when her tooth comes out (see Figure 2.10). Loeloe is sitting in class, thinking of how much money she will receive for her tooth and what she will be buying with this money (see Figure 2.10 (a)). The characters are both 'typical and individual'. The typical allows the reader to associate with a character, like Loeloe, by finding similarities to her. The typical in *Loeloe en die tandmuis* is that every child's experiences include losing a tooth (see Figure 2.10 (b)). What would differ, though, is what each child is going to buy with his/her money and the amount of money he/she will receive, or not. Although children of the same age may reveal typical characteristics, as discussed in Chapter 1, every person is an individual (Johnsons. 2009: 70).

Children want to become part of their reading experience, and they want to play the main character in a story. In *The Bee Tree* (1993) by Patricia Polacco, like most children of her age, Mary Ellen, the young girl, gets bored with her reading; she would prefer to play outside. Her grandfather takes her on a journey to hunt for a bee tree. People from the town joins the exciting chase, but when Mary Ellen gets home, she makes a discovery of her own (see Figure 2.11):

He spoons a dab of honey onto the cover of a book. "Taste", he says, almost in a whisper. "There is such sweetness inside of that book too. Such things ... adventure, knowledge, wisdom. But these things do not come easily. You have to pursue them. Sometimes, even the sweetest of things must be worked for (Polacco. 1993: 21).

This book reveals the experience of children that do not like reading, but who are learning to appropriately deal with their emotions. In my illustration work and specifically in *Lucy's Growing Letters*, I employ the same device. A child who has reading and writing difficulties will identify with Lucy's experiences. In this children's book, Misses Morris asks Lucy a question, Lucy becomes scared and isolated. She escapes the reality of now and creates her own reality in her imagination, where she becomes part of letters land. *Lucy's Growing Letters* reveals how a character can grow and entice a reader's reactions to become part of an experience and learn through it. If a child cannot associate and feel empathy with a main character, he/she will not care enough to want to finish the book to see what happens next (Johnson. 2009: 70). Like *The Bee Tree* and *Lucy's Growing Letters*, Mary Ellen and Lucy provide a reliable example to the child of how to deal with certain social situations and problems.

In *Lucy's Growing Letters*, I utilise characterisation to create continuity. Lucy is identifiable through characteristics, such as her curly hair her polka dot dress and her facial features (see Figure 2.7, 2.9, 2.12). This helps the reader to decode the narrative with minimal confusion (Johnson. 2009: 71). In my other children's book, *Something out of Nothing*, Shara is also presented constantly throughout the book with various facial expressions to reveal the pattern of events. Shara lives in Soweto and works at the local

hospital. When Shara arrives at work she is told that the hospital closed that morning. Shara then walks home with tears streaming down her face, and she cries so much that her tears start to flood the village. After talking to the sun, she begins to collect rubbish to make *Something out of Nothing* (see Figure 2.13(a-c)). The depiction of other human and animal actors in *Lucy's Growing Letters* and *Something out of Nothing* is consistent throughout the narrative.

By giving names to characters may certainly add to our understanding of a character (Nikolajeva and Scot. 2006: 82). *Something out of Nothing* reveals a true story about Shara's life that adds meaning to the narrative. Children form bonds with characters in books and, in the process, they also adopt the manners in which these characters solve problems, or cope with emotional dilemmas. Both Lucy and Shara provide culturally identifiable connections, which enhance and affirm the reader's self-esteem (Johnson. 2009: 73). "Unless Children see themselves reflected in the characters of good quality books, within their cultural milieu, they will continue to have negative images of self" (Pellowski. 1980: 50). Most importantly, because the child may see him/herself in the character, any form of pedagogy in the narrative can be presented to the reader in a non-authoritarian and non-didactic way (Johnson. 2009: 73).

### **Imagination and play**

Children can talk about various experiences that happened before. For example, a child can talk about his experience on Christmas day. "Father Christmas came in the middle of the night and told me to be a good boy this year. He gave me a big hug and climbed on his sleigh and flew away". Anyone can imagine such an event. If a child imagines it very well, a visual image forms in the child's mind. Many narratives do not generate such visual images. Narratives that serve the development of children must generate mental images, because they enable reading ability and memory (Egan. 2005: 27). While reading *Lucy's Growing Letter*, children associate with characters and form mental images. The stranger and more surprising these mental images are, the more memorable

they become (Egan. 2005: 26). In this way children remember the character that visually resembles a 'b', 'd', 'p', 'q', 'g', 'f' and 'v'.

We are who we are by virtue of what we have actually experienced. But part of who we are is determined by what we imagine, because what we imagine is one facet of our way of thinking, our view of the world, and our way of being (Engel. 1999: 186).

Children's minds comprise emotion, body and imagination, which work as a whole (Egan. 2005: 99). Children must reflect on the mental images that are evoked by *Lucy's Growing Letters*. That is why letters and illustrated characterisation are combined in my illustrated children's books. Children can reflect back on these letter characters in their own way. "Given the universality of image-generation in all oral cultures, it would be prudent to reflect on ways to use this cognitive tool in teaching" (Egan. 2005: 27).

Children's books that are employed for purposes of child development, enlarge, enrich and expand children's experiences. "And crucial to this is engaging children's imaginations in the world around them" (Egan. 2005: 212). The purpose of *Lucy's Growing Letters* is to develop the child's imagination (Haviland. 1973: 179) and children who reverse letters will benefit from this.

Imagination is not some desirable but dispensable frill, it is the heart of any truly educational experience; it is not something split off from the basics or disciplined thought or rational inquiry, but is the quality that can give children life and meaning. It is not something belonging properly to the arts, but it is the pragmatic centre of all effective human thinking. Our concern is not to promote imagination at the expense of something else; rather it is to show that any conception of rational inquiry or the foundations of education that depreciates imagination is impoverished and sure to be a practical failure. Stimulating the imagination is not an alternative educational activity to be argued for in competition with other claims, it is a prerequisite to making any activity educational (Egan. 1988: ix).



As mentioned in Chapter 1, with the development of oral language, the curious discovery that words could be used to generate images in the mind, emerges. “These mental images, if children reflect on them, are unlike anything else with which we are familiar in the world” (Egan. 2005: 26). According to Paul McKellar (1957: 28), the way in which a child’s perceptions are turned into images, stored and used, will depend on the individual. Different children appear to have a preference for particular images and the ability to imagine varies between individuals. Where one child will associate an ‘f’ with a frog, other children may associate ‘f’ with flower, fast food, flame, farmer, fuel, fat, father, friend, fairy, finger, fish, fisherman, flag and forearm. In *Lucy’s Growing Letters*, the imaginary world is about children internalising perceptions and ascribing new meanings to letters (Duffy. 1998: 23). Children will interpret the relative weight of a character according to what they know about the letter being represented, and according to how much they know (or are willing to know) about the character being represented (Nodelman. 1988: 102).

Imagination can be seen as “material for a dream” and enriches children’s lives (Winnicot. 1971: 37). The kinds of images children might create in their minds will likely be different in each case, but thus provide a cognitive tool of significant power (Egan. 2005: 27). Engaging the imagination is the very heart of learning. Imagination is linked to development. As the child grows his/her ability to imagine increases (Duffy. 1998: 51). As mentioned, children with reading and writing problems escape reality and “create an image and view that is uniquely their own” (Duffy. 1998: 8). We see that it is this facility that brings meaning and understanding to knowledge (Egan, 2005:27). “A sense of wonder and an emotional response to material, as mentioned above, is important in engaging children’s imagination” (Egan. 2005: 53).

Through imaginative play children create and it is play that enables them to realise in their imagination the things that cannot be realised in reality (Duffy. 1998: 58). Stories are tools that help children re-invent their world (Engel. 1999: 53). “The playground is a richly inter-textual and creative site where children act out stories of their own devising”

(Goodwin. 2004: 28). Life rehearsal<sup>23</sup> elements in fantasy and in play help children to cope with life and with a variety of complex social problems (Moyles. 1994: 92). When children play, it is common to see girls and boys acting out episodes of everyday life. These children play by acting out familiar events with familiar characters, very definite plots, and their associative dialogues and body languages. Through this, children practice a familiar scene that are important to them, and explore the language of relationships, hierarchies, behaviour and self-esteem. This can be interpreted as being important rehearsals for life and living.

People tend to forget that playing in itself is a form of therapy (Winnicott. 1971: 67). “Playing is an experience in the space-time continuum, a basic form of living” (Winnicott. 1971: 67). In Tom Birdseye's story book, *Just call me Stupid* (1993) (see Figure 2.14), he writes about the experience and difficulty children tend to have with reading and writing.

In his imagination he becomes the White Knight, just like when he played chess at home. Riding off the board and across a sunlit meadow, lance held high, the light glinting off his shield - polished silver with red dragon breathing fire – dazzling the cheering crowd that had gathered to see him joust (Birdseye. 1993: 5).

Patrick forms imaginary worlds away from the immediate now to escape the reality of difficulty that confronts him. The author captures the imaginary escape of Patrick when he has some difficulty in pronouncing the word that the teachers present to him. As showed in Patrick's imaginary escape, he refers back to his past experience. Reliving an experience makes him feel better, and where he can freely imagine and compose his own story and experience. In playing, the child is free to express his/her creativity (Winnicott. 1971: 71). Vygotsky (1978: 247) says that playing usually generates a “zone of proximal development” that gives a child a head start to develop higher levels of psychological functioning that improves memory, reasoning, language and empathy. Vygotsky also argues that children function beyond their average abilities when they play. Play is the

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<sup>23</sup> Life Rehearsal: Children acting out experiences that have happened, or that they have seen.

universal (Winnicot. 1971: 57), and can help children that tend to reverse letters improve recognition and identification.

Play is an important facility or activity that releases children's minds, while it reflects back on to the world (Egan. 2005: 31). Play is very exciting. "The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control" (Winnicot. 1971: 64). Play expands children's meta-level of thinking, and helps children to think about the world, where they can be free from the constraints that society imposes upon them (Egan. 2005: 31). Creativity and imagination come from the human ability to play and society rests on this ability (Duffy. 1998: 14).

According to Weininger (1988: 148) fantasy is a form of imagination where what is imagined has little resemblance to the real world. If imagination is defined as the ability to think 'as if', fantasy is the ability to think 'what if'.

Children with reading and writing problems make use of their childlike talents - the joy of creating and discovering, "the wonder at variety and ingenuity – the fresh view of the different, the other" (Hunt & Lenz. 2001: 4). The reason why children with reading and writing problems use fantasy, is that it provides an intangible source of unconscious fears and desires. Fantasy fuels their dreams, their problems and, therefore, their narrative fictions (Hunt & Lenz. 2001: 2). Personal fantasy allows children to speculate, to explore possibilities, to indulge their private selves - to imaginatively consider things that cannot be. For example, Lucy imagines that she meets all the letters that she cannot distinguish from each other. This offers Lucy worlds of infinite possibility, of expansiveness, of freedom (Hunt & Lenz. 2001: 2).

Through fantasy talk, children can become part of each other's worlds in a way that may not otherwise be possible (Engel. 1999: 109). Many fantasy worlds do not cater for a developing mind at all, but in *Lucy's Growing Letters* children expand their thinking and come into contact with letters through imagination (Hunt & Lenz. 2001: 4). Children

must be provided with a narrative that makes particular knowledge meaningful and imaginatively engaging (Egan. 2005: 101).

Le Guin (1992: 79) says that fantasy is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not anti-rational, but para- rational; not realistic, but surrealistic, super realistic, a heightening of reality.

Fantasy entails things and events that cannot exist or happen, but fantasy can often be seen as a direct critique on things and events that do exist or happen (Hunt & Lenz. 2001: 8). “The domain of modern fantasy is forms of narrative which many have seen as expressions of or as being closely related to, deep and universal human drives” (Hunt & Lenz. 2001: 8). In children’s books, as in *Lucy’s Growing Letters*, fantasy is of the utmost importance, because of its relationship to reality. Alternative worlds must necessarily be related to and comment on the real world (Hunt & Lenz. 2001: 7).

“One conventional explanation for the supposed preponderance of fantasy” in *Lucy’s Growing Letters* is that children are in some way closer to the unknown, the unseen and the mystical (Hunt & Lenz. 2001: 6), also like in Harry Potter. The narrative voice comprising a distinctive set of characteristics determines the way in which a story is told (Engel. 1999: 155). Children use some piece of what they have read, either some of the characters and their experiences and events or the basic theme or plot, but they transform the structure into a pattern that fits their personal experiences. Children will replace the author’s story, tone, or plot with personal experiences. They seem to borrow what they read and hear and personalise it (Engel. 1999: 177), as explained in the case of the boy who thought he was Flash.

In kindergarten children develop by seeing and handling attractive shapes. Children must be given children’s books that display and use illustrated characterisation and shapes, colours and layout to develop the child’s imagination (Havilland. 1973: 179) by involving all senses. When children start elementary school, the senses begin to lose

their educational status (Arnheim. 1969: 3). But by evoking imagination in a narrative, learning becomes a much more natural way of teaching children effectively.

This Chapter has outlined the importance of stories. Children forge some emotional contact only with those stories that they experience as being meaningful to them and with which they can associate. This Chapter also revealed that imagination and play are very important with regard to the education of children. Imagination emanates from perception and children's books need to generate 'mental images' that make it easier for children to read and to remember. While children are at play, they are busy thinking imaginatively about things, stories or circumstances.



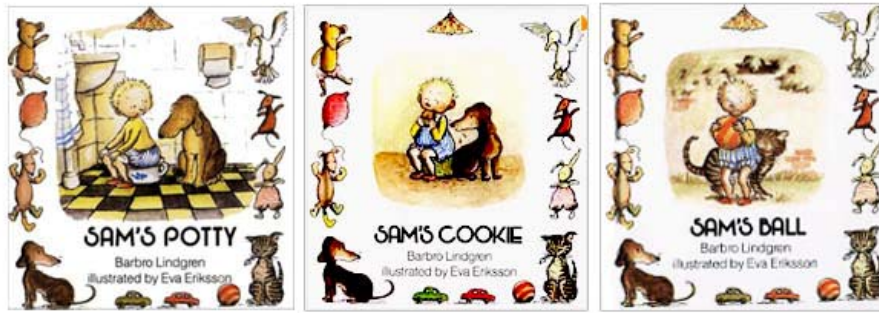
**Figure 2.1** (top)  
Illustration by Gianluca  
Foli, *The Bear with the  
Sword* (2008).  
Collection: Private (Cali.  
2008: 2, 9, 12).





**Figure 2.2 (a)** (top) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Something out of Nothing* (2009), p16. Oil paint and ink on paper, 45×28cm. Collection: Artist's collection. **(b)** (right) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Something out of Nothing* (2009), p17.





**Figure 2.3** (top) Cover Illustration by Eva Eriksson, *Sam's Collection* (1988). Collection: Gericke Library, Stellenbosch University (Lindgren, 1988).



**Figure 2.4** (a) (top) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Something out of Nothing* (2009), p4. Oil paint and ink on paper, 45×28cm. Collection: Artist's collection. (b) (bottom) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Something out of Nothing* (2009), p1.



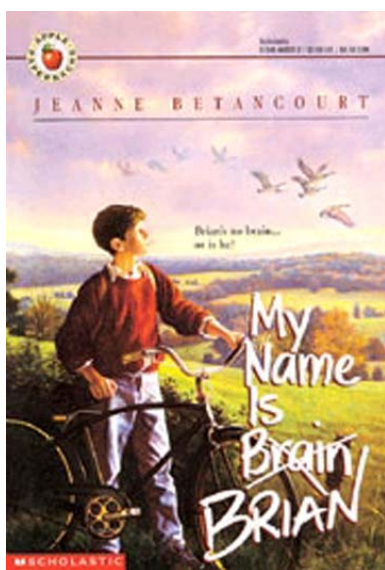


**Figure 2.5 (a)** (bottom) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Something out of Nothing* (2009), p10. Oil paint and ink on paper, 45×28cm. Collection: Artist's collection.





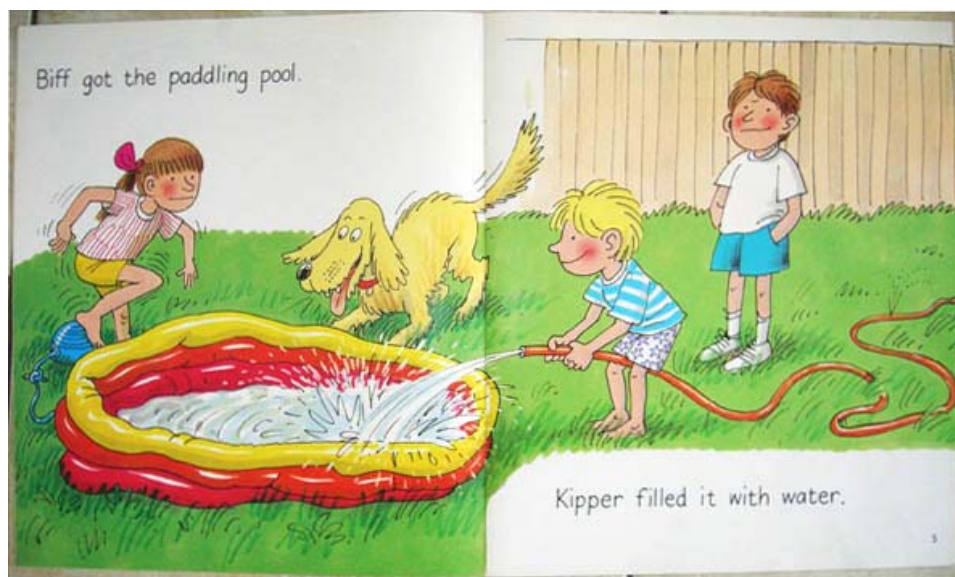
**Figure 2.5 (b)** (top) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Something out of Nothing* (2009), p6. Oil paint and ink on paper, 45×28cm. Collection: Artist's collection.



**Figure 2.6 (a)** (top) Cover Illustration by Mimi Harrison, *My Name is Brain Brian* (1993). Collection: Private (Betancourt, 1993).



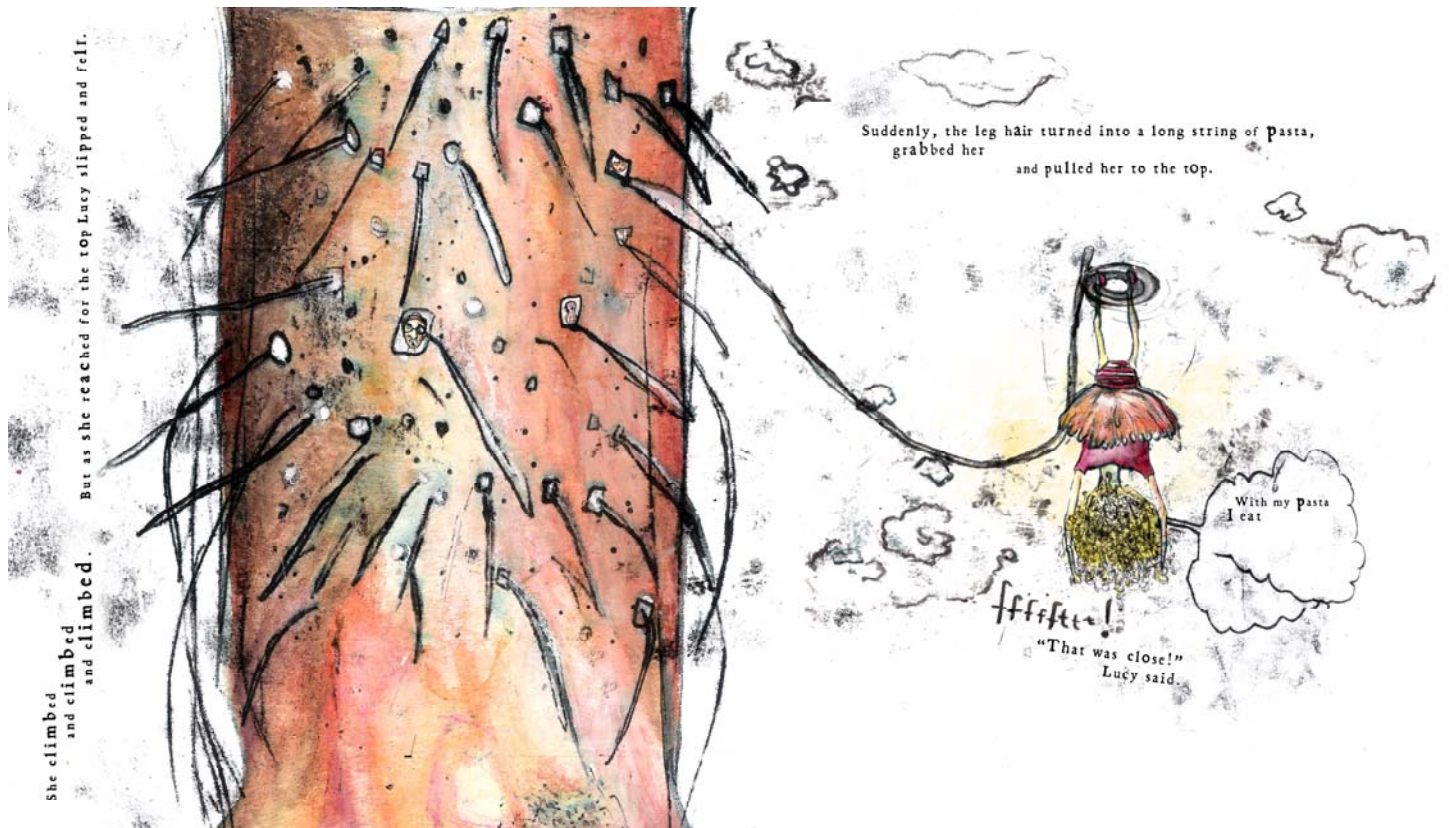




**Figure 2.8 (a)** (top) Illustration by Alex Brychta, *The water fight* (1989, reprinted 1998), p 4 & 5. 37×32cm. Collection: C.R. Swart Primary School. **(b)** (bottom) Illustration by Alex Brychta, *The water fight* (1989, reprinted 1998), see above for details. p 6 & 7.



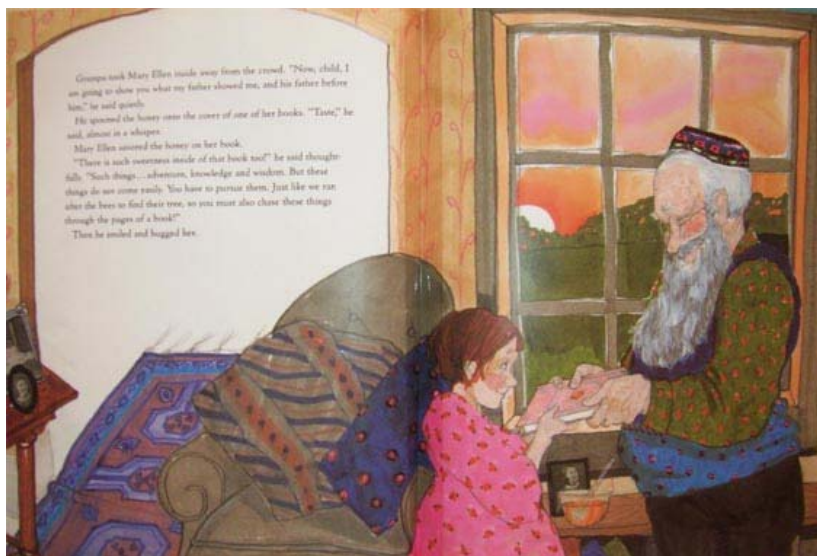




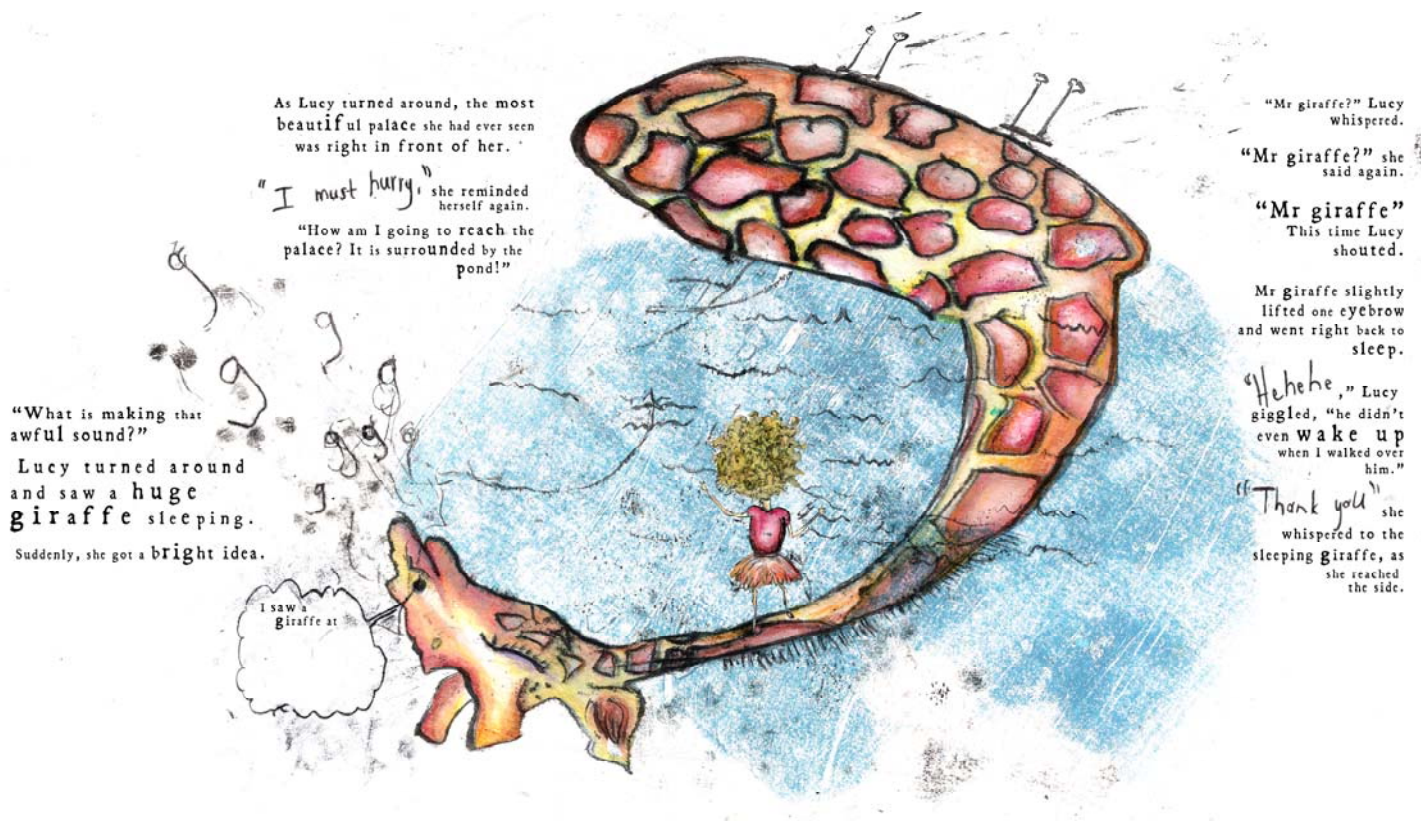
**Figure 2.9** (top) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Lucy's Growing Letters* (2010). Oil paint and ink on paper, 45×28cm. Collection: Artist's collection.



**Figure 2.10 (a)** (top left) Illustrations by Dr Jack, *Loeloe en die tandmuis* (1990), p 4 & 5. 16 × 14.5cm. Collection: C.R. Swart Primary school. **(b)** (top right) Illustration by Dr Jack, *Loeloe en die tandmuis* (1990), p 12 & 13.



**Figure 2.11** (left) Illustration by Patricia Polacco, *The Bee Tree* (1993), p10. 25.5 x 20.3cm. Collection: Middelburg Mpumalanga Library.



**Figure 2.12** (top) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Lucy's Growing Letters* (2010). Oil paint and ink on paper, 45×28cm. Collection: Artist's collection.





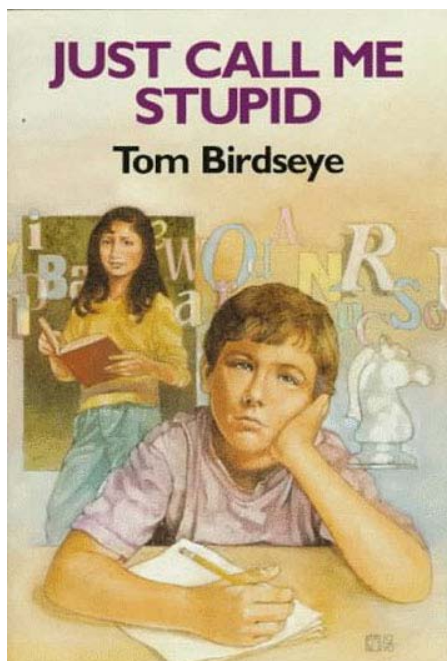
**Figure 2.13 (a)** (top) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Something out of Nothing* (2009), p3. Oil paint and ink on paper, 45×28cm. Collection: Artist's collection. **(b)** (right) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Something out of Nothing* (2009), p7.







**Figure 2.13 (c)** (bottom) Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Something out of Nothing* (2009), p14. Oil paint and ink on paper, 45×28cm. Collection: Artist's collection.



**Figure 2.14 (a)** (top) Cover Illustration by Mimi Harrison, *My Name is Brain Brian* (1993). Collection: Private (Birdseye, 1993).

### **CHAPTER 3 – PRACTICAL WORK**

On 15 July 1867, Robert Lowe said in the House of Commons on the passing of the Reform Bill: “I believe it will be absolutely necessary that you should prevail on our future masters to learn their letters” (Oxford Dictionary of Quotations. 1979: 318).

Many good picture books capture a childlike guilelessness; a sort of defenseless and vulnerable fantasizing that comes very close to a dream (Nodelman. 1988: 109).

I will explain in this Chapter how and why pictures, words with narrative characterising and specific genres alleviate children’s difficulty to distinguish between letters. I use all the research detailed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 and I refer to my practical work in order to reflect on my own findings and proposals. I propose that children that have a difficulty with the reversal of letters should be given children’s books that make a separate and new contribution to this problem, comprising of only the significant letters that are commonly reversed. It has been stated in this literature that perception plays a huge role in any aspect of association with pictures, letters and stories. In Chapter 1 it emerged that when children start to read, they form associations. I am of the opinion that, based on the literature discussed above, association is a process of internalising perception. We know now that a child takes from a visual text that which is meaningful to him/her, which in turn is determined by his/her particular past experiences and needs. The individuatedness of perception underpins this notion.

There have been numerous studies concerning the problem of the reversal of letters. Most studies focus on the relationship between pictures and words and phonemes. The problem is that children who have a difficulty with the reversals of letters cannot grasp the conversion between symbols into sound and sounds into symbols to form a representation in their mind, because they are not given visual ideas that fit into their perception of the world. Using only letters and pictures would not grant children the

opportunity to develop reading and writing skills and to distinguish between certain letters.

I discovered that, “when we examine imagination, we also deal with some of the central features” of children’s emotional “engagements with knowledge” (Egan. 2005: 214). Children’s emotional responses are the central concern, not merely their conceptual grasp of the logic of content (Egan. 2005: 214). Indeed, the main point is that children’s books are able to stimulate emotional engagement and establish unconscious learning.

### **Contextual information is the most significant**

As explained in Chapter 1, words and pictures in children’s books are intertwined texts. In educational picture books children are given a dictionary of letters with accompanying pictures to help them to learn to read. Associations are visually generated, so that the children can remember the letter that accompanies the idea. There is no doubt that these books help children to learn to read. I argue that specific visual contexts affect the ways in which the reader pays attention to the imagery. Children do not necessarily form associations, because visual contexts can be interpreted in different ways and provoke different meanings. Children with reversal problems need to be given some visual stimulants context. Such context must already be part of their perception. This includes their past experience and cultural environment.

Figure 2.12. illustrates such context, the giraffe is sleeping and snoring very loudly. Children living in South Africa will easily form associations with the giraffe that form a ‘g’. The circumstances and setting in which the giraffe appears, clarify the meaning of the event.

Most educational books do not reveal the contextual information in which visual stimulant are situated. As explained in Chapter 1, these educational picture books are translated as an inaccurate moment of association, and also that pictures and word are inseparable intertwines, and complement each other. According to my findings

educational books without contextual information are not sufficient for children who are struggling with the reversal of letters or any other computer program or game that only shows a letter with accompanying visual idea. Visual ideas need to be placed in context to help children distinguish between letters. By pursuing this course of action, children can associate themselves with the significant content of the pictures found in different places. This can broaden the association processes that are so limited when they try to identify and remember letters.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, recent studies focused on the dynamics of the picture book, and how the text and image utilise “two different forms of communication, which together create a form unlike any other” (Nikolajeva & Scott. 2001: 2). In picture books, the visual images do not really provide a counterpoint to the words, but they rather expand or enhance the words (Nikolajeva & Scott. 2006: 17). Educational books should also provide children with a visual stimulant that includes contextual information. Such context will expand and enhance the understanding of specific associations, which will also ingrain that letter as imprint in the child’s perception. For example, when a letter ‘d’ is offered together with a visual stimulant of a dog, the dog needs to be in some context, which will help the child to associate and identify with the experience of the dog. The dog and child may be walking in the park, or playing frisbee. The visual stimulant has to be situated in circumstances with which the child can identify, which suggest new experiences of which the child would want to become part. Visual images are claimed to improve comprehension by linking prior experiences to new ideas, but it is also a generative process.

When referring to ‘n *Annerste ABC-boek vir aspatatte* (2002) by Maritha Snyman (see Figure 3.1), the letters are placed within some contextual information through rhyme. Through the use of contextual information, letters are enhanced and expand to form a context of broader understanding. Through this medium children can become part of the action or experience what is taking place.

I argue that characterisation adds weight that expands development of reading ability. Contextual information has to be revealed through characterisation taking place to its fullest extent. By this I mean that a character – in this case a zebra – (see Figure 3.1), should be given different facial expressions and actions to reveal that he wants to kill the bee that is flying in circles around him. According to Barbara Bader (1976: 1), picture books as an art form hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page. A story collects meanings as it reveals the pattern of events that are happening. A pattern needs to be established to reveal the dramatic action of what the zebra will do next, which is what children want to know. In Dr. Seuss's *ABC: An Amazing Alphabet Book* (1963), characters are given an exciting pattern to grow, which will form part of different perceptual ideas because of the interaction between words and pictures (see Figure 3.2). In this book the narrative storyline is of the essence, and as previously said, children should be given new experiences which they can relate and become the main character of the story. When granting a character his full potential by the use of different patterns, a child's attention to visible things is captured. Children become amused when they can follow and be surprised by what the character is going to do next. By giving letters the necessary contextual information that forms a pattern, children can be surprised and their attention can be captured through the pattern of events.

As stated in Chapter 1, knowledge acquired through visual perception helps not only in detecting the nature of an object or action appearing in the visual field, but it also assigns the present object a place in the system of things constituting children's total view of the world. Books that refer to past perceptual experience tend to make a bigger impact on that individuals' remembering experience, as seen in *Lulu en die Tandmuis*, described in Chapter 2. Children are able to associate with this book because every child's perception includes losing a tooth, but what will differ in such an experience, is what he/she will buy with the money thus 'earned'.

In my own illustrated story book, I attempt to expand the child's reading experience, because it refers to relevant contexts by stimulating the child's memory. Which would be, for example, my grandfather's dog, Tom-tom, with which I played on Christmas day (see Figure 3.3). This makes it possible for a child to make associations with his/her remembering experience. As stated throughout this dissertation, every child's perception differs, including his/her past experience and cultural environment that forms his/her perception. In Figure 3.4, when a dragon is already part of children's field of reference, recognition and identification enhance understanding and association. They 'write-in' their own experience in the smoke bubble. Their past experiences could involve a story they watched on television, a book that was read to them, or a dream - any experience that collided with these children's perception of the world. If a child had an important experience of a dragon, this past experience will help with an association toward the specific letter 'd' and would enhance the probability to not reverse letters. Children need to be given more than one stimulated images of a letter "d" to associate with, so that they can choose from their range of past experiences. Putting a remembered experience into a story allows us to think about our past, even when we have no intention of sharing those thoughts with anyone (Engel. 1999: 26).

Stories that in this way can capture the flow of past experience in time and space are processes that enable children to experience themselves. By drawing on such self-narrating experiences, learners can reach deeper and more satisfying levels of response and understanding (Goodwin. 2004: 112). As stated, perception and recognition are inseparably intertwined.

By using the children's interest and understanding of popular culture and their creative involvement in play, by combining this with their own perception that becomes interactive in a book, the above will be the basis for developing a proficiency in reading and writing.

## **Preperception individuals' visual imagery**

The way in which our perceptions are turned into images, stored and used, will depend on the individual. Different people appear to have a preference for particular images and the ability to imagine varies between individuals (McKellar. 1957: 19)

I subscribe to Paul McKellar's statement, namely that children who suffer the difficulty of the reversal of letters need to be given more than one visual stimulant that can help them to form their own representation that can elicit an answer to a problem. McKellar states that children have different preferences for a particular image. It should be stressed that past experience entails mental images that are generated and stored in the mind. Past experience is centred in the individual and this is the origin of interpretations of contexts. The problem, as stated here, is that if children cannot use specific visual stimulants that are given to them, it is difficult to enhance their ability to recognise letters. Through combining strange visual stimulants with the already situated understanding of the world, the problem grows. The adult writer cannot assume efficacy of any visual stimulants as a matter of course, because huge discrepancies exist between what adults regard as stimulant and what children experience as visually provocative. As stated in Chapter 1, children's mental images are unlike anything with which adults and authors are familiar.

The book *My eerste HAT* by L. Schlichting, B. Sluzer and M. Verburg (2009), can be seen as an informative guide, a dictionary for children (see Figure 3.4). This educational book serves as a tool for using and understanding language to learn a variety of words. The book contains words paired with pictorial text. The pictorial information reveals the meaning of the words of the rhyme that explains a bit more about the word. The book contains the whole alphabet with accompanying visual stimulants and words that contain a specific letter. Children that have a difficulty with the reversal of letters also need to be given a dictionary of visual ideas. While the emphasis is on explaining the meaning of words in *My eerste HAT*, it provides multiple illustrations as supplementary information that also elicits diverse and a variety of associative stimulation.

Giving more than one visual stimulant to children that have a difficulty in distinguishing between letters, may provide the solution. Usually teachers have a preference for different visual ideas in order to distinguish and teach letter recognition, but they only use specific visual images that represent specific letters. Usually a 'b' is proposed with a visual idea of a bear, and 'd' with a drumstick. Teachers seldom consider whether children will relate to these images or not.

Where one child may associate a letter 'd' with a doorbell, the next one may associate it with a drumstick. As said in Chapter 1, Chris Horn (2006: 2) explains that representation itself is a perceptual model. If the images, as visual stimulants that the teacher provides, have no bearing on the children's various mental representations, the teacher's images will remain meaningless to the children. However, when confronted with a choice between a range of images, the child will independently find meaning in the associative pairings. For example, a letter 'b' can be proposed with several visual stimulants like a bug, boat, bunny, balloon, ball, bear, box, butterfly, buffalo, bee and bubbles (see Figure 3.5). Variety suggests a range of possibilities, rather than the rigidity suggested by only on associative image. As quoted in Chapter 1, William James (1890: 444) said that the only things we commonly see are those we have preperceived, and the only things which we preperceive are those which have been labelled for us, and the labels stamped into our mind.

At Key Stage 1, "pupils should be taught to respond imaginatively in different ways to what they read. It is suggested that you can interest children best by starting with what they are already familiar with in their environment. "Learning experiences that are offered to children must reflect their current level of development and offer the possibility of further development" (Duffy. 1998: 55). The everyday world around them can become more meaningful, and meaningful in a new way, if they orient themselves to it through drawing attention to the limits within which this world exists (Egan. 2005: 86).



Another crucial point is that every child must be given visual stimulants that are culturally relevant. Children from South Africa, for example, will probably not be familiar with a Panda bear.

### **The main character**

According to the National Department of Education, children should learn from a specific alphabetic font (see Figure 3.8). In the context of this dissertation this prescript is not applicable, because when the focus is on children who experience some difficulty to distinguish between letters, the aim is identification and recognition of letters. Letters can evoke an imaginary world that emanates from the immediate now (see Figure 3.6). Letters could become characters with which children can more easily associate by revealing specific actions, appearances, emotions and thoughts typical to specific characters. Through characterisation, letters could grow into a character or animal that is able to contribute the flow of the narrative, and to form a new experience in which children are able to become part.

The characterisation of letters in story-form will enhance the understanding of the child's ability to distinguish between letters, by spontaneously associating him/herself with the characteristics. Drawing has the ability to show how things work much more efficiently than writing can (Barrs. 1988: 63). If those letters that are commonly reversed are presented in a variety of circumstances or contexts in a narrative, a new experience of these letters is elicited. In this way, word and letter characterising will make it easier to teach children that have a problem with the reversal of letters skills and knowledge (Egan. 2005: 212). This also merges school with environment, and imagination with reality (Egan. 2005: 109). It has been said that children who experience a learning difficulty tend to escape reality through an imaginary world where they form their own reality. Capturing such 'imaginary reality' would be more effective.

(Stockar. 2010: <http://www.ibby.org/index.php?id=718>) states that the child's capability to understand what he/she has read or seen, improves when integrated with the child's

own context and personal experiences. This is empowering and enables the child to take a stand on what he/she has read. Only this kind of complete and deep reading education will take children toward a real, integrated literacy.

### **Just a story**

The experience of a present moment is never isolated. A present moment is the most recent among an infinite number of sensory experiences that occur continuously throughout life (Kepes. 1955: 32).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the experiences of children with learning disabilities are unique. Their reading and writing difficulties influence their engagement in classrooms, playing, and being themselves. All children share their past and present experiences, but children who suffer difficulties with reading and writing, do not share their feelings and problems with others and they tend to isolate themselves from the world.

When the past experience of every individual becomes part of an association this can improve this association and children can remember experiences better and it is easier to relate to their state of mind, as described in Chapter 2 in the books, *Just call me stupid* and *My name is Brain brian*.

When children talk about their experiences on the playground, in class, other children tend to join in, as stated in Chapter 2. In classes, children and teachers do not talk about the problem that children tend to reverse their letters. No one knows how they feel and what they experience, because children often feel humiliated to talk about their experiences and difficulties. Rogers (2000: 13) states that the key is to find what children are good at. Stories are able to help to raise these learners from their isolation as Susan Engel stated in Chapter 2, through an imaginary world of unconscious learning.

An illustrated children's book that captures reading disability as experience, normalises an experience that usually causes shamefulness and secrecy. Such normalisation means

that children with reading disabilities can share their experience and, in the process rid themselves of such disabling shamefulness. Instead, they begin to understand that they themselves can change disability into ability. The enabling facilities of their imaginary world which they now share, comes to the fore in their minds.

### **Variety on the second level**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, in *Just call me stupid* (1993), Tom Birdseye addresses an experience that children with reading disabilities tend to have. This makes children aware that there are numerous other children who also experience reading and writing problems. This is an example of the satisfactory function which stories gives us, and the role it plays in helping to gain mastery over emotions. And this is a powerful tool to assisting children to learn their letters and to make associations. According to Alasdair MacIntyre (1981: 196), any fact or event becomes intelligible by finding its place in a narrative.

“True reading pleasure lies in the satisfaction from reading a book that talks to children and touches them personally” (Stockar. 2010: <http://www.ibby.org/index.php?id=718>). Children associate themselves with experiences, as mentioned. These experiences are reflected in a picture book, genre of a story, their imagination or a dream. This world of the child is in an emotional agreement with the experience of the specific book. Children enjoy books more when they believe they can play or be the main character of a book.

According to Christine Todd studies suggest that what someone feels about an event can determine how well it is remembered. It is also possible that the emotional intensity of an experience influences the way the memory is represented and/or communicated to others (Engel. 1999: 65).

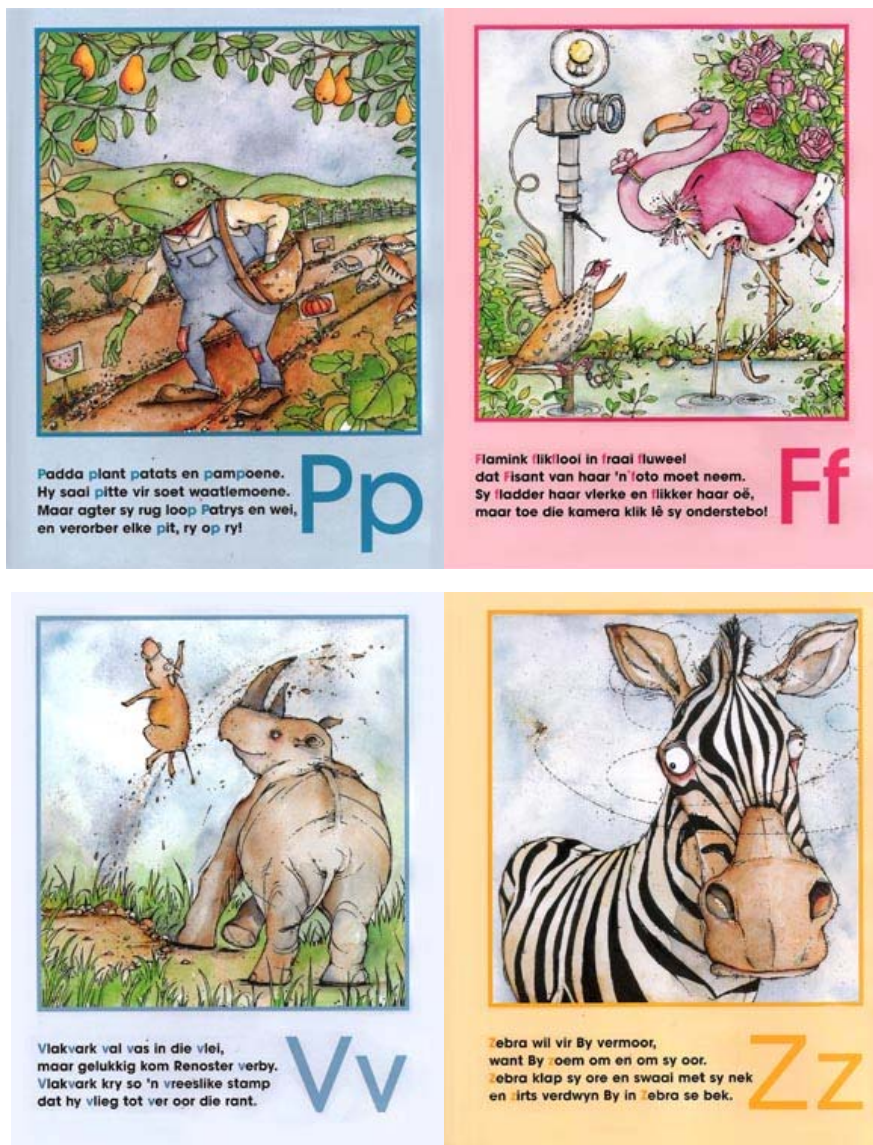
Stories not only communicate or reconstruct experiences, they also are an experience. When again referring to “*Lulu en die tandmuis*” (see Figure 2.4), this book provides an example of an author and illustrator who take children on a fantasy journey, where the children believe anything that happens or that is revealed through the genre of the story.

Children become so fascinated with what is happening and the experience of this book, that they forget to ask questions about why some things are happening the way they are happening. For example, when Lulu is dreaming that the mouse takes her on a journey to a place where everything is built with teeth, she first needs to climb through the mouse hole. In the process she becomes small and is, therefore, able to climb through the hole. Children would normally not ask why she becomes so small, since they are so fascinated with what is happening that they cannot wait to see what is happening next. Children accept exactly what a book is telling them. Such experiences stay forever. It is my belief that stories could be used to teach children unconsciously to develop proficiency in the recognition of letters, by means of a combination of letter characterisation, pictures and words. Children should be given the opportunity to play the main character of the story, by forming analogies with a character; and in doing so, children will spontaneously find the book interesting.

In this chapter it emerged that, as in many educational books that only focus on sounds, the combination of letters and images can lead to warped associations. I propose that children should be given diverse images as part of a story. Such diversity would give them new experiences to which they can relate. Several books were discussed to describe this process of establishing educational picture books that would enhance these children's proficiency in the reversal of letters. It was stated that by combining all these aspects of pictures, words, characterising and specific genres, these would form a story that comprises of growing letter<sup>24</sup>. This will teach children to play while they are learning to recognise and identify letters.

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<sup>24</sup> Growing letters refer to letters that become alive in my proposed narrative to reveal the voice of the world of children who experience some difficulty in the reversal of letters. These letters can also refer to children's perception that grows because of the different reactions and meanings that are provoked through the use of different stimulated images of a letter.

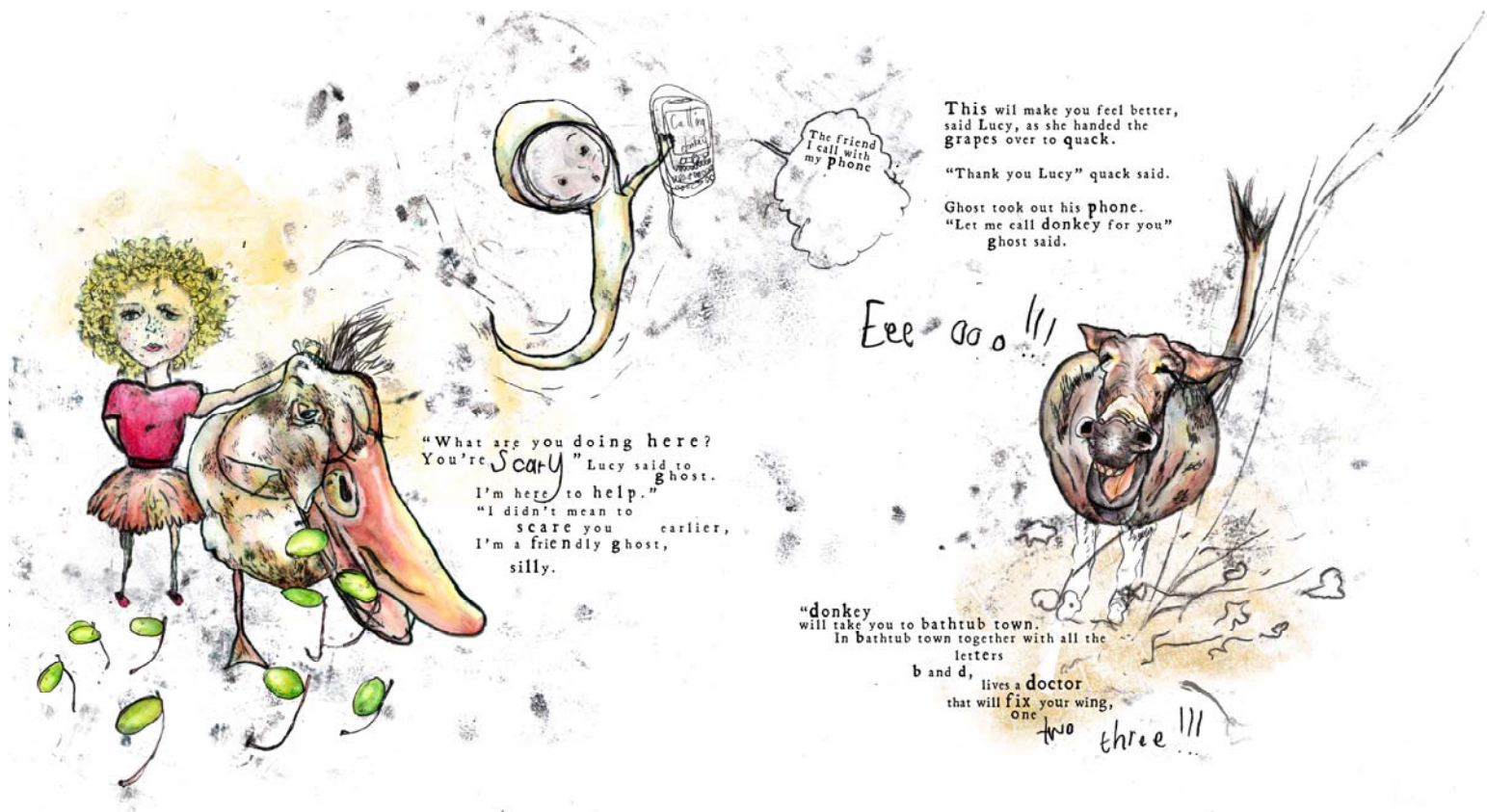


**Figure 3.1** (top left) Illustrations from Karen Lilje, *'n Annerste ABC-boek vir aspatatte* (2002). Collection: C.R. Swart Primary School (Snyman. 2002: 16, 6, 22, 26).

**Figure 3.2** (top right) Illustrated by Dr. Seuss's, *ABC: An Amazing Alphabet Book* (1963). Collection: Gericke Library, University of Stellenbosch (Seuss. 1963: 1, 18).



**Figure 3.3** (bottom), Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Lucy's Growing Letters: Work in progress* (2010). Oil paint and ink on paper. Collection: Artist's collection.



**Figure 3.4** (left), Illustration by Christel Badenhorst, *Lucy's Growing Letters: Work in progress* (2010). Oil paint and ink on paper. Collection: Artist's collection.





**Figure 3.7** (top left) Illustrated by Mia Allison, *Alphabet prints* (2006). Screen prints, 27.9 cm x 35.6 cm. Collection: Artist's collection.

**Figure 3.8** (top right) font from the National Department of Education.



## CONCLUSION

Children are not victims, and they have an unusual capacity to play with the commodities that surround them and create their own meanings. The young define their own culture (Zipes. 2002: 34).

In the above paragraph, Jack Zipes succinctly sums up my argument. Pictures, text, characterisation and narrative storytelling are integrated to establish a manuscript with a new and unique outcome with a view to enhancing reading ability. *Growing Letters* refer to letters that come alive in these narratives to reveal the voice of the world of children who experience some difficulty reading and writing. These letters can also refer to children's perception that grows because of the different reactions and meanings that are provoked through the use of various stimulating imaging of a letter. In my book, readers will be able to sense multiple stimuli and build perception based on various visual cues. The quality of the child's perception will improve by associations to context relevant experiences. Children's brains process new experiences based on past experiences. Through the perception of these experiences, children will form mental representations of a letter that is revealed through a character letter.

Figures 2.7, 2.9 and 2.12 illustrate that pictures, text, characterisation and narrative storytelling are incorporated in an educationally pleasurable reading book. Using a variety of visual ideas in a South African context that begin with letters that are commonly reversed, presented through letters that grow into a character and seen as pictures, children are able to associate with the actions, appearances, thoughts and feelings that these characters are experiencing. The letters, 'b', 'd', 'p', 'q' and 'f' and 'v', are the letters that form part of the narrative, because these letters are most often reversed. These letters grow into different characters (see Figure 4.1) that become part of an imaginary world where the unusual happens and where the children escape the reality of the problem. Children are bombarded with visual ideas that are used to broaden their perception of knowledge.

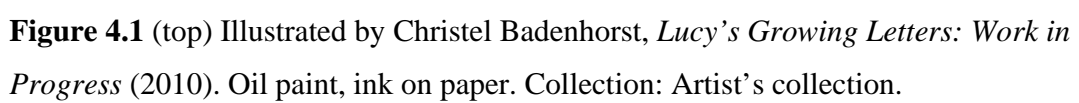
Children with reading and writing difficulties are taken for therapy in an attempt to decrease their own responsibility in the process, which is where the child imagines he/she has a problem. Children with reading and writing difficulties tend to be more passive when it comes to reading and writing, and spend less time in this pursuit, which adds to the continuation of poorer reading skills. “The poorer get poorer” (Stanovick, 1986). Because of a lack of practice, they lag behind in developing skills. This is a problem, because children need to learn to develop thinking skills or to communicate through language. Schools should focus on helping children with reading and writing difficulties in class environments. There have been numerous studies concerning children with reading and writing problems, but the key is to the new experience with which the child can associate. Through the use of current events, children with reversal problems can be helped in a playful and exciting way, both in schools and at home. By reading *Lucy’s Growing Letters*, children are able to use this picture book as an aid to surmount their own difficulty.

Using a variety of growing letters combined in a narrative to form part of a new experience, children will form associations while playing and enjoying a book. *Lucy’s Growing Letters* helps children with reversal problems to explore their world in the light of what happens in the story and to use their own experiences to understand the significance of story happenings and association toward letters. This book makes the most of the innocence of beginner readers to engage them in new reading game (Zipes, 2002: 30). Children can also ‘write in’ their own experiences that they regard as valuable. This is an empowering form of participation that serves as an interaction between the past and the present.

Stories enable children to experience more than the limits of their immediate environment. By means of this book, children develop a bigger picture of the world of other children with reading and writing difficulties and they build their perception from this experience by discussing their problem with each other

*Lucy's Growing Letters* narrates the story with which children with reading and writing disabilities are confronted. As stated in this dissertation, children want to play the main character in such stories as *Lucy's Growing Letters*. This book reveals the stories of a girl with reading and writing difficulties, of which no one is often aware. The narrative is coloured in a number of ways, and the perspective from which the genre is interpreted, reveals the innermost feelings, struggles, ideas and fantasies of the child with reading and writing difficulties, combined with the integration of words, pictures and illustrated characterisation of letters. These alphabet letters that are commonly reversed develop through characterising in a suitable playful way. In this book the main characters are presented with a specific class of qualities. This class deals with fear of failure, being isolated, but eventually escaping through the imaginary world of growing letters, where a whole new world of fantasies is invoked, and where every character letter reveals some kind of meaning and experience. The main character stays constant throughout the text and carries the pattern of events through the story.

This means children are then able to extract meaningful information from the picture. *Lucy's Growing Letters* reveals how a letter can grow into a character to entice the child's reaction to become part of this experience called a story book. The child creates an imaginary world that expands through growing letters.



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