



Realistic teenage fiction with a sex-related theme: Readers' responses to *Slinger-slinger* by Francois Bloemhof

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Abstract

Realistic teenage fiction with a sex-related theme: Readers' responses to *Slinger-slinger* by Francois Bloemhof

Francois Bloemhof submitted his novel for teenagers, "Slinger-slinger" for the Sanlam competition for youth fiction in 1996. Eventually this prizewinner in the beginners' category was published in 1997. The main theme of "Slinger-slinger" is the sexual awakening and identity of teenagers.

A study was undertaken to obtain the opinions of teenage readers about the success of "Slinger-slinger" as a whole, as well as to gauge the success of integrating sexual aspects in this novel. The study also served to obtain information about the reading needs of teenage readers with regard to realistic teenage fiction and teenage fiction with a sex-related theme.

The findings of the study underlying this article indicated that the participating teenage readers regarded "Slinger-slinger" as successful and interesting, and that they would like to read more realistic Afrikaans teenage fiction such as "Slinger-slinger".

Opsomming

Realistiese tienerfiksie met 'n seksverwante tema: tienerlesers se reaksie op *Slinger-slinger* van Francois Bloemhof

Francois Bloemhof het sy tienerverhaal "Slinger-slinger" in 1996 voorgelê vir die Sanlamwedstryd vir jeuglektuur. Hierdie jeugverhaal was 'n pryswenner in die beginnerskategorie vir jeuglektuur en is in

1997 gepubliseer. Die hooftema van "Slinger-slinger" is die seksuele ontwaking en identiteit van tieners.

'n Studie is onderneem om die menings van tienerlesers oor "Slinger-slinger" in die geheel, maar veral oor die outeur se hantering van seks-verwante temas byeen te bring. Die leesbehoefte van tieners aangaande realistiese Afrikaanse tienerfiksie en tienerfiksie met 'n seksuele tema is ook deur die studie vasgestel.

Die studie wat die grondslag van hierdie artikel vorm, het bevestig dat die deelnemende tienerlesers dit eens was dat "Slinger-slinger" 'n suksesvolle en interessante tienerboek is, en dat hulle meer realistiese Afrikaanse tienerfiksie soos "Slinger-slinger" sal wil lees.

1. Introduction

In this article the reasons for a readership study of Francois Bloemhof's teenage story *Slinger-slinger* is briefly outlined. Subsequently, readership studies is defined in order to provide the angle from which the initial study was undertaken. The research methodology is outlined and the teenage readers' perceptions of *Slinger-slinger* are also discussed in this article.

1.1 Background

In 1996 Francois Bloemhof's novel for teenagers, *Slinger-slinger* (winding or swaying), was a prizewinner in the beginners' category of the Sanlam competition for youth fiction. This Afrikaans book was probably acclaimed because of the open manner in which sensitive issues such as hetero- and homosexuality, promiscuity, divorce, incest, tense family relationships, and drug- and alcohol abuse are portrayed. The main issue dealt with in *Slinger-slinger* is teenage sexuality, in particular sexual awakening and the identity forming of teenagers.

In 1998 sensational media reports were published in which upset parents, teachers and other adults protested against the inclusion of *Slinger-slinger* in the ATKV's (Afrikaans Language and Culture Society) Children's Book Award, category 13-15 years of age. Two conflicting opinions about *Slinger-slinger* could be distinguished: one group was of the opinion that the sex-related theme and explicit language use were not suited for teenage fiction, while another group supported the view that teenagers need to read about realistic real-world issues in order to prepare them for life. Interestingly, no comments about the opinions of the implied readers, the teenagers themselves, were published.

Research on readership with the focus on readers' views was undertaken to serve as basis for this article. Questions like the following were posed to determine whether *Slinger-slinger* can be regarded as a successful teenage novel when measured against the criteria for teenage fiction: Has the issue of sexuality been treated convincingly? Do teenage readers regard *Slinger-slinger* as an interesting and realistic novel? Has this readership study contributed to a better understanding of the nature and functionality of realistic teenage fiction using sexuality as theme?

In this article the responses of teenage readers who read *Slinger-slinger* and completed questionnaires afterwards, will be discussed to demonstrate that the majority of them found *Slinger-slinger* interesting, realistic and contributing to acquiring necessary life skills and an understanding of difficult situations.

2. What does readership studies imply?

Gericke (1994:114) defines readership studies as a study of man, individually or in a group, as part of a library readership or not. Readership studies scrutinise man as a reader and interpreter of all types of messages and records containing human experience, knowledge and art, irrespective of the purpose for and situation in which they are used.

The above definition implies that man is studied as a reader, whether reading is for relaxation, information seeking, or within the context of an occupation. Within readership studies the reactions and perceptions of non-readers, such as persons with reading disabilities or the illiterate are also investigated in order to change them into those of readers (Gericke, 1994:114).

Several researchers agree that the same narrative elements that form the basis of a literary evaluation of fiction also apply to the readership evaluation of fiction (Fourie, 1989:231-234; Lukens & Cline, 1995:7-148; Nilsen & Donelson, 1993:58-94; Oosthuizen, 1991:304-313). It is important though to emphasise that a readership-study analysis of a text differs from a literature-based study in that it is undertaken from the *readers' point of view*. In an analysis of this kind it is thus attempted to find answers to the following questions: To what extent does the text correspond with readers' interests and developmental levels? In which way could a reader possibly be influenced by the text?

3. Realism

Realism in literature can be defined as a honest, un-idealised representation of real life (Van der Elst, 1992:417). However, literary realism is only a *representation* of reality, and a representation cannot be identical with that which it represents (Morris, 2003:4). Absolute objectivity is an illusion (Van der Elst, 1992:417) as realism represents the author's world view and is based upon his/her perceptions of what is "true" or "real" (Morris, 2003:4).

According to Stephens (1992:2) no text or discourse can be separated from ideology. Ideology can be defined as a society's sense of meaning and value (Stephens, 1992:1), or the prevailing assumptions and customs of a society or nation. When reading or evaluating children's or teenage fiction, one should keep in mind that the intention of authors usually is to foster in a reader a positive perception of socio-cultural values, such as contemporary morality and ethics (Stephens, 1992:3). Some writers try to change or resist social practices, as in the case of Bloemhof writing openly about teenage sexuality.

Related to the above is the assumption that readers' subjectivity can be effaced as part of the reading process (Stephens, 1992:4). This may happen especially in the case of reading realistic fiction where a reader's point of view may be changed to the author's sense of what is "real" (Stephens, 1992:4).

In conclusion, realism can be defined as a *representation* of real life, based upon the author's ideological assumptions, with the possible power to change a reader's subjectivity.

In the next section the research methodology followed will be discussed.

4. Research methodology

4.1 Introduction

The empirical study underlying this article consisted of two parts: a text evaluation of *Slinger-slinger* and a questionnaire that was completed by teenage respondents who had already read *Slinger-slinger*. Since the main focus of this article is to reflect on the responses of teenage respondents to *Slinger-slinger*, only a brief description of text-evaluation process will be provided after which the results of the questionnaire will be discussed.

4.2 Text evaluation

In order to compile a readership model to evaluate realistic teenage fiction with a sex-related theme, the following aspects were paid special attention to: the nature of realistic teenage fiction with reference to teenagers' developmental levels; teenagers' reading interests; the characteristics of successful realistic teenage fiction, and the characteristics of a successful implementation of the issue of sexuality in teenage fiction. The model used has two main components: firstly the readership analysis of teenage fiction, and secondly the requirements for the incorporation and implementation of a theme related to sex and sexuality.

Readership analysis consists of the following elements: plot, theme, characterisation, narrator and narrative perspective, background (portrayal of time and space), use of language, and style. All the elements were measured against the characteristics of successful realistic teenage fiction, teenagers' developmental levels, and their reading interests. Fourie (1989:231) emphasises that an author should approach each element from the viewpoint of teenage readers, keeping their possible perceptions in mind. Teenage fiction will only appeal to its readers if a link exists between the story elements, teenagers' reading needs, and their perception of the world.

Eiselen (1993:48-49) identified certain requirements for the incorporation of themes on sexuality in teenage fiction and her findings were confirmed when compared to results obtained in other subject-related literature (Bjorn *et al.*, 1994:16-19; Hendrickson, 1994:20-23; Polese, 1989:86-87; Schmidt-Dumont, 1994:112-15; Walker & Bauer, 1994:25-28; Westin, 1996:42). These requirements include inter alia the portrayal of correct sexual facts, the description of feelings and emotions, sexual conduct, a lack of prejudice, a diversity of sex-related subjects and viewpoints, and realism.

When *Slinger-slinger* was analysed according to the elements of the designed model, the conclusion arrived at was that *Slinger-slinger* succeeds as realistic teenage fiction as it measured up to the criteria stated in the readership model for the evaluation of realistic teenage fiction dealing with a sex-related theme (Wiggill, 2001:71-94). *Slinger-slinger* can probably play a definite role in preparing teenagers for several real-life aspects and in illustrating that they are not the only ones facing problems and questions regarding their sexuality.

The most outstanding facet of *Slinger-slinger* was definitely Bloemhof's portrayal of the issue of sexuality since the book fulfilled the reading needs of teenagers in this regard. It was also indicated that Bloemhof portrays teenage sexuality realistically and without prejudice, and that he provides reliable information and correct facts (Wiggill, 2001:95-106). These findings can possibly contribute to teenagers' attainment of developmental tasks as specified by Havighurst (1972). As such *Slinger-slinger* can rightly compete with the foremost of international realistic teenage fiction with sexuality as theme. Furthermore it definitely contributes to the genre of Afrikaans teenage fiction.

In the second part of the empirical study *Slinger-slinger* was given to teenage respondents to read and they had to complete a questionnaire afterwards. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine what the perceptions of teenage respondents were regarding *this specific book*.

4.3 Questionnaire

4.3.1 Compilation

Since sexuality is a sensitive topic to confront teenagers with, the researcher was assisted by Professor J.E. Kruger, a sociologist and questionnaire specialist, in the careful construction of questions in order to encourage teenagers to express their true feelings about the representation of sexuality in *Slinger-slinger*. It was also necessary to construct relevant, clear questions that concur with the language and intellectual capacity of secondary-school learners.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. In Section A questions regarding the respondents' demographic profile and reading interests were included. In section B questions about *Slinger-slinger* were asked to test the respondents' view of the novel as well as their opinion on the success thereof. The questions were constructed with teenagers' developmental levels, reading needs and interests in mind. The readership evaluation model and the positive and negative comments about *Slinger-slinger* published in news articles, were also considered.

The questionnaire, consisting of 47 questions, could not be too long since it had to be completed by teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18 years, and had to be completed within a school break of between 25 and 40 minutes.

With the exception of four questions, all questions asked were coded with fixed responses (Sarantakos, 1998:229) because

- open questions are not always suitable for sensitive issues such as sexuality, because respondents might not describe their true feelings;
- coded questions simplify the processing of the data;
- the researcher was concerned about the ability of language expression – especially that of the younger respondents;
- open questions take more time to complete than coded questions and for that reason the latter was more appropriate, because the questionnaires had to be completed within the time restriction of a school break.

For the purposes of this study the data were processed by means of descriptive statistics and the use of frequencies, percentages and calculated averages. Descriptive statistics were applied as first-level analysis in order to place the respondents' context within a specific framework. The data were presented in cross- and two-way tabulations, but were used only as descriptive qualitative applications.

Only certain elements of the readership model were tested in the questionnaire, namely the utilisation of theme, characterisation, language and style, as these elements were pertinently criticised in the media.

4.3.2 Duration of the study

The questionnaire formed a cross-sectional study because the teenagers had to complete it within a week after they had received and read the books. This measure was taken in order to ensure that they completed reading the book, and that the contents and story line were still fresh in their minds.

4.3.3 Research context

Research context refers to the environment where the research takes place. In the case of this study, questionnaires were given to teenagers in secondary schools in Potchefstroom.

Schools in Potchefstroom consist of a variety of learners: day-scholars and boarding-house scholars from a divergent cultural, economic, geographic and educational backgrounds and language

groups – a variety which enhances the possibility of a wide representational group.

Potchefstroom has six secondary schools with *Afrikaans-reading* learners, but two of the schools decided not to participate in the study because of the controversial issues included in *Slinger-slinger*. The refusal to take part was decided upon without consultation with the parents of the teenagers, or without the parents receiving the letters in which they were asked to give their consent.

It is necessary to mention that this study was independent from the actual schooling or curriculum, but the access to the schools and their learners was effective to use as a source of population for the random sample, to reach the teenagers at one specific time to hand out the books and to complete the questionnaire.

4.3.4 Cover letter

A letter of introduction was given to each school's principal during a meeting with the researcher in which the nature of the research was explained. At each school a teacher was appointed to assist the researcher.

It was explained to teachers that they would play a supportive role in the determination of the random sample, the circulation of the books and the coordination of the group for the completion of the questionnaire. Teachers were requested not to discuss the book with the respondents in order to change their views about it. The researcher was responsible for the handing out and collecting of the questionnaires. Anonymity was thus assured which encouraged the respondents to be open when completing sensitive questions.

4.3.5 Research group

The research group was compiled of a random sample of 88 Afrikaans male and female teenagers with established reading habits. These teenagers were between the ages of 13 and 18 years and from four secondary schools in Potchefstroom. The random sample method was selected because it would have been nearly impossible, time consuming and expensive to involve all teenagers in Potchefstroom in the study.

In order to determine the random sample, the researcher requested class lists of every grade from each participating school, and randomly chose 40 names for each grade. Letters were given to each learner to be completed by their parents in order to gain their

consent. The controversial nature of *Slinger-slinger* was stated in the letters and the researcher's contact information was provided.

Twenty-five participants per school would have been randomly selected from the learners whose parents provided their consent for their participation in the study. Unfortunately the planned selection did not realise because

- three of the schools decided that due to the controversial nature of *Slinger-slinger* learners in Grades 8 and 9 were too young to participate;
- at the English schools, volunteers were asked to participate in the study because of some English learners' negativity towards the reading of Afrikaans fiction;
- the principal at one of the schools allowed only learners from Grades 10 and 11 to participate because the Grade 12 learners were busy with examination preparation;
- at one school the overseeing teacher ignored the random sample for unknown reasons, and gave the books to both learners on the random sample list, as well as to volunteers;
- at one school all learners with reading problems were omitted from the class lists.

5. Teenage respondents' perceptions of *Slinger-slinger*

The analysis of the questionnaire was organised according to the research questions since the questionnaire was viewed as complementary to the readership evaluation of *Slinger-slinger*.

5.1 Research question 1: Can *Slinger-slinger* be regarded a successful teenage novel when measured against the readership criteria for teenage fiction?

To answer the first research question, namely to determine whether *Slinger-slinger* can be regarded a successful teenage novel when measured against the criteria for teenage fiction, the researcher was led by points of criticism published in the media about the elements of theme, characterisation, language usage and style. Questions concerning these elements were stated to obtain the respondents' views about them.

5.1.1 Theme

Points of negative criticism raised in the media regarding the theme of sexuality include the complaint that young readers should not be exposed to aspects like sexuality and alcohol- and drug abuse because such exposure can lead to permissiveness and experimentation (Anon., 1998a:3; Fourie, 1998:15; Janzen van Vuuren, 1998:8; Visser, 1998:8). Some newspaper readers also expressed the opinion that teenage sexuality, incest, sexual abuse and illegitimate relationships have no place in teenage fiction, and that these aspects have not been presented sensitively in *Slinger-slinger* (Anon., 1998b:3; Fourie, 1998:15).

Positive views published in the media concerning the theme of *Slinger-slinger* stressed the openness with which the author wrote about controversial issues aimed at contributing to the formation of balanced, informed youths (Louw, 1998:137; Nieuwoudt, 1999:13; Spaarwater, 1998:11). Some newspaper readers also mentioned that teenagers have a need for openness regarding life's issues, and that parents should discuss it with them in a positive, unbiased way (Anon., 1998a:3; Beaufort, 1998:14; Fourie, 1998:15; Le Roux, 1997:17; Snyman, 1998:8).

The above-mentioned points of criticism will be addressed in section 5.4 where the implications of the study of *Slinger-slinger* will be discussed.

It was evident from the results of the questionnaire that the respondents identified as the most interesting themes of the novel the following: firstly the *love* affair, secondly the sexual relationship between Stephan and Lisa, and thirdly the sexual abuse of Lisa.

Respondents furthermore indicated that the theme of sexuality was presented in a realistic and explicit manner, as required in the criteria for treating of sex-related themes in teenage fiction.

5.1.2 Characterisation

Negative points of criticism published in the media regarding characterisation in *Slinger-slinger* included opinions that the characters do not develop enough because of too many themes, and that all adults are portrayed as weaklings (Le Roux, 1997:17). Other reviewers felt that the portrayal of characters experiencing conflict situations was not detailed and convincing enough to serve as role models for teenage readers (Hough, 1997:33). When measured against the evaluation criteria used for the readership model, one of

the points of criticism was that one of the characters, Lisa, should have been portrayed more effectively, especially concerning the reasons for her promiscuity. The portrayal of the other characters was perceived as convincingly done (Wiggill, 2001: 85).

It was asked in the questionnaire whether the respondents could identify with the characters in the novel, because identification with characters contributes to the experiencing of realism in a novel. A question to determine whether the respondents were of the opinion that the author created a credible view of teenage life in the novel was also included. The teenage readers responded positively to the first question. They also responded positively to the latter question – probably because teenage readers are able to identify more easily with realistic, credible teenage characters.

The majority of the respondents (71,26%) indicated that the author created realistic and credible characters with whom they could easily identify. More than 90% of the respondents indicated that the portrayal of teenage life, with the presence of all aspects of sexuality, drug- and alcohol abuse, peer pressure, sexual abuse, and tense family relations, was realistic (Wiggill, 2001:120). From these combined results it was clear that the respondents regarded the characters to be realistic, credible and that they could identify with them.

5.1.3 Language usage and style

Slinger-slinger was especially acclaimed for the way in which Bloemhof formulated the themes in the sociolect of contemporary teenagers (Anon., 1996:4; Louw, 1998, 136). Reviewers and parents were of the opinion that Bloemhof has a good understanding of the way in which teenagers express themselves (Louw, 1998:137) and that the novel is written in straightforward, realistic language.

One reviewer, however, felt that the use of crude language appeared to be forced and was only applied for effect (Hough, 1997:33), and one teacher stated that the language use was banal (Anon., 1998b:3).

To determine whether the language and style contributed to the realism in *Slinger-slinger* the respondents were asked whether the use of crude language shocked them, and, in another question, whether they viewed the language usage as realistic, in other words, whether teenagers actually speak like that.

Although the language usage in *Slinger-slinger* shocked some of the respondents (17,24%), the majority indicated that the language used is a convincing representation of the language usage of teenagers (Wiggill, 2001:122). The respondents thus indicated that the characters in *Slinger-slinger* use language with which they are familiar.

It is clear from the above that the respondents agreed that *Slinger-slinger* meets the criteria of a successful teenage novel.

5.2 Research question 2: To which degree is *Slinger-slinger* successful as representative of teenage fiction portraying a sex-related theme?

Questions were asked to determine whether Bloemhof was successful in the description of sexual behaviour; the description of the characters' feelings and emotions; whether the issue of sexuality was presented in an unbiased and realistic manner; and whether Bloemhof presented Lisa's sexual abuse and Derek's homosexuality in a way that teenagers perceive to be realistic.

5.2.1 Description of sexual behaviour

The respondents were asked whether they were shocked by the descriptions of sexuality and sex-related incidents in *Slinger-slinger*. In another question the respondents were asked whether they regard descriptions of sexuality as functional for the development of the story line in the novel. Only 5,68% of the respondents were shocked by *all* the descriptions of sex-related incidents, and 43,18% indicated that some of the descriptions of sex and sexuality shocked them. Most of the respondents (79,55%) agreed that the descriptions of sexuality and sex-related events were functional and necessary for the development of the course of events in the novel (Wiggill, 2001: 125).

5.2.2 Description of the characters' feelings and emotions

A conclusion arrived at as part of the readership analysis of *Slinger-slinger* was that Bloemhof succeeded in portraying the feelings and emotions of some of the characters, but not all of them, especially Lisa's. Points of criticism regarding this aspect were also published in the media. To determine the respondents' opinion in this regard, a question was asked in which the respondents had to indicate which characters' feelings and emotions should have been elaborated on.

The respondents indicated that Bloemhof should have elaborated on the characters' feelings and emotions, especially after their experience of sexual intercourse, and also on Lisa's feelings and emotions about her sexual abuse (Wiggill, 2001:124).

5.2.3 Prejudice

Since any form of prejudice is unacceptable in readership studies – especially regarding sex-related issues in teenage fiction – the respondents were asked whether they had ever experienced any inherent traces of didacticism or prejudice in Bloemhof's portrayal of teenage sexuality. The majority of the respondents indicated that Bloemhof presented the issue of sexuality without didacticism or prejudice, and thus confirmed the researcher's analysis of the findings (Wiggill, 2001:103-104).

In one instance the outcome of the responses was that Bloemhof subtly tried to convey to readers that sex constitutes much more than just the physical deed. Before sexual intercourse took place between Stephan and Lisa, Stephan realised that he was physically, but not emotionally ready for the sexual deed (Bloemhof, 1997:61). The appropriate extract was included in an open question and the respondents were asked to present their own interpretation of the paragraph in order to test their insight into the importance of the emotional load of a sexual relationship. Most of the respondents expressed the opinion that the author tried to convey the idea that one has to be physically and emotionally ready for sex and be prepared to bear all consequences with responsibility (Wiggill, 2001:127). It is thus clear that most of the respondents grasped what the author was trying to tell them, without experiencing it as didacticism.

5.2.4 Realism in the portrayal of Lisa's sexual abuse and Derek's homosexuality

The literature-based study revealed that sexual abuse should be treated very cautiously in teenage fiction and that authors should focus on the victim's emotions such as guilt, self-hate, breach of trust, emotional isolation, and grief. The text evaluation indicated that Bloemhof succeeded in portraying Lisa's despair and aggression. The researcher also wanted to determine whether the respondents agreed on this point.

Questions were asked to determine whether the respondents perceived Lisa to be promiscuous because her father sexually

abused her, and whether the respondents comprehended the reasons for Lisa's promiscuity. More than 70% of the teenage readers responded positively to both questions and supported the view that, except for a lack of more detailed description of her feelings and emotions, Lisa's sexual abuse was presented in a realistic way (Wiggill, 2001:128-129). Most of the female respondents identified strongly with Lisa and more than half of the male respondents understood the impact of sexual abuse on her (Wiggill, 2001:129).

The respondents also indicated that they agreed with the advice that Stephan gave to Lisa concerning her abuse, namely to talk to a responsible person such as a trustworthy teacher (Wiggill, 2001:130).

Derek's homosexuality as sub-theme led to the point of criticism that the inclusion of the aspect of homosexuality was not justified. It was thus attempted to find out whether the respondents felt that it was possible for Stephan not to notice that his best friend was homosexual, in other words, whether the representation of Derek's homosexuality was realistic. More than 60% of all the teenage readers responded positively to the question (Wiggill, 2001:130). Nearly 80% of the respondents agreed that it is realistic that Stephan and Derek's friendship could continue notwithstanding Derek's homosexuality (Wiggill, 2001:130). They also supported the view that the fact of Derek's homosexuality was justified and that the author presented it in an unbiased way to teenage readers (Wiggill, 2001:131).

It can thus be concluded that the respondents indeed underscored the idea that Bloemhof was successful in the description of sexual behaviour and characters' feelings and emotions. Furthermore the readers confirmed that the issue of sexuality was presented in an unbiased and realistic manner, and that Bloemhof presented Lisa's sexual abuse and Derek's homosexuality in a realistic way.

5.3 Research question 3: Do teenage readers regard *Slinger-slinger* as successful teenage fiction?

In order to establish whether the teenage respondents regarded *Slinger-slinger* as an interesting and realistic novel, the results of the questions concerning the first and second research questions were collectively combined with specific questions regarding the third research question.

Two specific questions regarding this research question were stated, namely whether the respondents found *Slinger-slinger* interesting and whether they liked the book. Although about 5% of the respondents indicated that they did not find the book interesting or acceptable, 23% found parts of the book interesting and acceptable, while 72% of the respondents liked the whole book.

From these results it was clear that most of the respondents viewed *Slinger-slinger* as an interesting, realistic novel that corresponds with their reading needs and interests. The results of the above-mentioned questions concurred with the results of the questions concerning the first two research questions.

5.4 Research question 4: What are the implications of this investigation for the evaluation of *Slinger-slinger* and teenage fiction in general?

One of the outcomes of the readership analysis of *Slinger-slinger* was that the novel is successful in that it fulfils teenagers' reading needs and interests, and that the issue of sexuality was perceived to be portrayed in a realistic, successful way (Wiggill, 2001:71-105). Should the results of the questionnaires correspond with that of the readership evaluation, it would imply that the respondents also found *Slinger-slinger* successful as a novel. A further implication is that the findings of this investigation can probably serve as an indication of what teenagers want to read about and how a sex-related theme in teenage fiction should be portrayed.

Questions relating to this research question were about teenagers' reading preferences and interests, the contribution of *Slinger-slinger* to the mental and social preparedness of teenage readers, and teenagers' reading needs regarding sexuality.

5.4.1 Teenage readers' reading preferences and interests

To outline the respondents' reading preferences and interests, questions were asked to determine whether they read fiction and if they do read fiction, in which language they prefer it to be; whether they read teenage or adult fiction; whether they read anything else than fiction, for example newspapers or magazines; and which topics interest them and should be treated in fiction.

Nearly half of the respondents indicated that they seldom read fiction. More than 70% of the respondents indicated that they mostly read English fiction and nearly 60% said that they read both adult

and teenage fiction. It also became evident that the respondents read non-fiction, magazines, newspapers and comics. Nearly 83% of the respondents prefer to read magazines.

Approximately 85% of the respondents had not read *Slinger-slinger* before the investigation was undertaken. Despite the stir in the media, they did not know about it. Teenagers thus do read, but they are not always aware of available realistic Afrikaans novels for teenagers.

Female respondents indicated that they were especially interested in fiction dealing with the following aspects: relationships with friends, love affairs with and without sex, resisting peer pressure, and alcohol- and drug abuse among teenagers. Male respondents preferred reading about the following: sport, love affairs including sex, sexuality, and relationships with friends. It is important for authors and publishers of teenage fiction to take note of teenagers' reading preferences and interests, because teenagers will read fiction if it meets their preferences and interests.

It is evident from the above-mentioned analysis that *Slinger-slinger* was considered as successful by the respondents, because they stated that it corresponded with their reading preferences and interests.

5.4.2 The contribution of *Slinger-slinger* to the mental and social preparedness of teenage readers

To ascertain whether Bloemhof represented a realistic view of modern teenage life in *Slinger-slinger*, questions were included to make sure whether it is in line with real-world experience if a girl in Grade 9 smokes and drinks, and whether alcohol and drugs are so readily available to teenagers as portrayed in *Slinger-slinger*. A question to establish whether the respondents experience peer pressure to use alcohol and drugs was also included.

All the respondents indicated that it is realistic that a Grade 9 girl indeed smokes and drinks. This response implies that all the respondents have seen or know Grade 9 girls who smoke and use alcohol. Nearly 80% of the respondents indicated that alcohol and drugs are as readily available as portrayed in *Slinger-slinger*, and 52% of them experienced difficulty in withstanding peer pressure to use alcohol and drugs (Wiggill, 2001:142).

The issue of whether the reading of *Slinger-slinger* assisted teenagers in acquiring life skills to deal with alcohol and drug abuse, teenage sexuality, sexual abuse and peer pressure was also incorporated in questions. Although some respondents were unsure about the possible outcome that reading *Slinger-slinger* would have in withstanding peer pressure, the statistical analysis of the responses proved that because *Slinger-slinger* is written in an explicit, realistic way the respondents did acquire life skills from reading it, especially in the management of matters like premarital sex and the sexual abuse of a friend (Wiggill, 2001:143).

The literature-based study undertaken indicated that many parents, teachers, and other adults supported the view that reading about drug- and alcohol abuse, and sexuality would lead to experimentation by teenagers (Visser, 1998:8; Fourie, 1998:15; Anon., 1998a:3; Wiggill, 2001:107). It was, however, interesting to note that nearly 75% of the respondents indicated that reading about drug- and alcohol abuse would *not* encourage them to experiment with it (Wiggill, 2001:142-143). About 61% of the respondents said that reading about sexuality would not encourage them to experiment with sex (Wiggill, 2001:143).

With reference to the above, 43% of the respondents stated that they would like to discuss *some* of the issues in *Slinger-slinger* with their parents or other adults (Wiggill, 2001:144). According to subject-related literature the effect of realistic teenage fiction can be heightened by positive assistance and explanations from parents/ adults.

A question whether the respondents would prefer to read honest, realistic and open teenage fiction in which all aspects of teenage life are covered and which prepares them for adult life was also included. Nearly 90% of the teenagers who formed part of the project responded positively to the question (Wiggill, 2001:144).

Media reports repeatedly stress that teenagers use and abuse alcohol and drugs; and that teenage pregnancy and the possibility of teenagers' contracting Aids and other sexual transmittable diseases are realities (Asamoah, 2003:9-18; Baloyi, 2003:3; Hoberg, 2002:219-235; Kahn & Benjamin, 2003:4; Kemp, 2003:4; Mba, 2003:15-25). Responses on the questionnaire revealed that teenagers experience all the above problems, and that they experience peer pressure regarding it. Many of the respondents stated that they had acquired more information on the above problematic issues after reading *Slinger-slinger*. It is thus important

for parents, librarians, teachers and other adults to promote the reading of well-written realistic teenage fiction. Adults should also be encouraged to discuss the issues presented in teenage fiction with teenagers: the literature-based study highlighted the fact that realistic teenage fiction is a safe way to introduce teenagers to the hard realities of adult life (Wiggill, 2001:47-50).

5.4.3 Teenagers' reading needs regarding sexuality

As stated in 4.2 and 4.3 the respondents liked *Slinger-slinger* and they thought the issue of sexuality was portrayed successfully by the author. Investigating teenage reading interests also covered the following aspect: Would the respondents like to read more *Afrikaans* teenage fiction dealing openly and realistically with sex-related issues? Which aspects concerning teenage sexuality would they like to read about? Would they like to read more *Afrikaans* teenage fiction which is open, honest and realistic about all aspects of teenage life?

More than 65% of the respondents reacted positively when asked whether they thought that more *Afrikaans* teenage fiction should include aspects of sexuality, and about 26% were unsure (Wiggill, 2001:146).

Female respondents indicated that they would like to read about uncertainties and fears concerning love affairs, the feelings and emotions surrounding the sex act and sexual abuse (Wiggill, 2001:146-147). Male respondents stated that they would like to read about the feelings and emotions surrounding the sex act, and the sex act itself (Wiggill, 2001:146-147).

When questioned about their need for open, honest and realistic *Afrikaans* teenage fiction concerning all aspects of being a teenager, more than 86% of the respondents replied that they would like to read more teenage fiction such as *Slinger-slinger* (Wiggill, 2001:147).

The above results imply that authors and publishers of teenage fiction should take note of teenagers' reading needs concerning sexuality in order to produce sensitive, honest and *Afrikaans* teenage fiction. It is also the duty of parents, teachers, librarians and other adults to make this kind of *Afrikaans* teenage fiction available to teenage readers.

6. Conclusion

The following four research questions used in the investigation were proven correct in the final outcome:

- Can *Slinger-slinger* be regarded as a successful teenage novel when measured against the criteria for teenage fiction?
- Is the issue of sexuality portrayed successfully in *Slinger-slinger*?
- Do teenage readers regard *Slinger-slinger* as an interesting and realistic novel?
- Has the investigation undertaken contributed to a better understanding of the nature and instructiveness of realistic teenage fiction focusing on sexuality?

Regarding the criteria for teenage fiction, namely the functional utilisation of theme, characterisation, language usage and style, the respondents' view's revealed that Francois Bloemhof has written an interesting, realistic and successful teenage novel from a teenagers' perspective.

Furthermore they stated that Bloemhof presented the issue of sexuality in such a realistic way that they gained insight into the required skills to cope with their sexuality in a responsible way.

The results of the questionnaire indeed revealed that most of the respondents are exposed to harsh language, drug- and alcohol abuse, sexuality, and peer pressure. Most of the respondents indicated that by reading *Slinger-slinger* they gained more insight on how to cope with all of the above problems.

Most of the respondents regarded *Slinger-slinger* as an interesting and realistic novel and they indicated that they would like to read more Afrikaans teenage fiction similar to *Slinger-slinger*.

In general, the results of the investigation can probably serve as guidelines for authors and publishers of teenage fiction since it is clear that teenagers of all population groups experience a need to read realistic Afrikaans fiction with sexuality as theme. Clear guidelines regarding teenagers' reading needs, reading interests, and their developmental tasks are provided in the study for the use of authors. Afrikaans teenage fiction should also be marketed more aggressively since most of the respondents were not aware of Afrikaans novels fit for teenagers.

It is also important that parents, teachers, librarians and adults look from a teenager's point of view at realistic teenage fiction, with or without a sex- or sexuality-related theme included. Present-day teenagers are confronted with many difficult issues that they are not always equipped to handle. If realistic Afrikaans teenage fiction can contribute to the acquirement of necessary life skills for teenagers, adults should regard teenage fiction more positively and recommend teenagers to read it.

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Key concepts:

reader reception: teenagers/youth/young adults/adolescents
reading preferences and reading needs of teenagers
sex/sexual abuse/homosexuality in youth fiction

Kernbegrippe:

leesvoorkeure en leesbehoefte van tieners
lesersresepsie: tieners/jeug/adolessente
seks/seksuele misbruik/homoseksualiteit in jeugfiksie

