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Arranging for Reading Engagement

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Imagine two classroom scenarios. In the first, fifth grader Yesenia slams shut her copy of *Love Like Sky* (Youngblood, 2018) and lets out a heavy sigh during a free reading period, prompting nearby classmates to look up from their books. “Peaches is sick!” Yesenia announces. Having gotten her friends’ attention, Yesenia explains that the main character’s younger sister is ill, and she flips back through the book to show them places that offered clues that had been nagging at her for a few chapters. Her classmate Megan asks to see the cover of the book, and promptly writes down the title and author in a notebook where she keeps a list of books she wants to read. Quentin asks if Peaches has an incurable disease, and Yesenia responds that she will try to figure that out in the next chapter. Latrice mentions that her younger cousin is struggling with a breathing problem, and for the next 5 minutes or so, the group talks about others they know who have health problems, both in real life, and in fiction they have read this year in school.

In a second scenario, first grader Felix is making a book about four-wheelers, and each of the six pages completed so far includes both pictures and words. He is working on a page that features a green vehicle trailed by squiggly lines that appear to indicate motion. With much deliberation, he writes underneath,

KN 4YELS KO FIS. Emilio, his neighboring buddy, leans over and asks, “What does that say?” and Felix responds, “Green four wheelers go fastest.” Without hesitation and with great enthusiasm, Emilio suggests, “You should draw us on it going fast through the woods!” Felix immediately begins to draw on the next page as he and Emilio think through the details in the illustrations, including the need for helmets. Felix announces that he will write, “Me and Emilio are riding in the woods.” For help with spelling Emilio’s name, he consults a sticker on the corner of Emilio’s desk where their teacher has printed his name. As he prepares to write “woods,” he articulates the /w/ sound, and begins to write *y*, as he wrote previously in his spelling of “four-wheelers,” as many emergent readers and writers might do (Morris & Templeton, 1999; Richgels, 1995). Noticing Felix’s confusion, Emilio offers, “It starts with a *w*, like Will’s name [a classmate], and like *web*,” pointing to the *w* accompanied by a picture of a spiderweb on the classroom alphabet/sound chart. Felix gladly accepts the help and adds, “And like *we*, like, ‘We are fastest.’ I’m gonna write that next.” He begins his next sentence with *WE*.

There are important observations to make about these two episodes. The children are motivated to read and write. They are strategic, and they are intentional. They are emotional and animated. They are learning with and from each other. In a nutshell, these children are *engaged* as readers/writers, and they participate in vigorous, student-centered classrooms. The notion of *engagement* becomes even clearer if you contrast these scenarios from those in which children are motivated only to get their literacy assignments finished; when they give up in the face of confusion or difficulty in reading and writing; when their emotions around literacy center on frustration, boredom, anger, or embarrassment; or where they complete assignments in silence and solitude.

You might also notice that no teacher is mentioned in either of these scenarios. Without a doubt, though, a thoughtful, expert teacher has worked to make this kind of engagement possible. Yet clearly, learning is maximized when students have taken up the activities for themselves. How do teachers make this happen? In this chapter, we will make the case for why a focus on engagement with texts and among students is a vital principle of classrooms that expand and accelerate literacy learning, offer some theories about what creates the phenomenon of highly motivated and meaningful literate activity, and describe what teachers can do to arrange for deep engagement and considerable amounts of reading.

Why Are These Principles of Effective Classroom Environments?

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Why should we want an instructional environment in which students are engaged as readers and writers, like Yesenia and Felix and their classmates, rather than merely compliant? In general, school engagement is consistently associated with positive academic and personal development (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), and engaged reading, specifically, is associated with higher reading achievement and with reducing academic disparities between groups of students (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012). The list of particular consequences of literacy engagement on children's development is extensive. For starters, because engagement is likely to contribute to the volume and breadth of reading children accomplish (Ivey & Johnston, 2013), they are also likely to experience what research suggests are additional benefits of extensive contextual reading, including expanding vocabulary (Duff, Tomblin, & Catts, 2015; Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987) and improving reading fluency (Allington, 2014).

When students are emotionally and intellectually invested in reading, they are also more likely to persist in their reading and to execute cognitive strategies in the face of difficulty (Guthrie et al., 2012). Because high interest in text mitigates the potential negative effects of text difficulty (Fulmer, D'Mello, Strain, & Graesser, 2015; Fulmer & Frijters, 2011), this persistence extends to complex texts that they find personally or socially significant.

Recently, Johnston (2019) theorized an important relationship between literacy engagement and the development of executive function, that is, the ability to manage working memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-control. Juggling and challenging the body's resources simultaneously, Johnston argued, requires activity that is goal oriented, and engagement is similarly goal oriented. Thus, children reading and writing what they care about, and in the process, managing changing cognitive and emotional demands of the activity, will expand their executive function. Why would we worry about this possibility? Johnston pointed out research indicating that kindergartners with better executive function in the spring of kindergarten also had higher levels of literacy and vocabulary growth, regardless of their beginning-of-year achievement (Blair & Razza, 2007).

If we consider literacy engagement to encompass not only reader-text interactions or time spent actually reading or writing print but also how the children might continue to think about what they read and write when they are away from the text, before, during, and after reading, as well as conversations they have about what they read and write, we realize even more benefits. As observed in scenarios we used to open this

chapter, when students participate in meaningful literacy tasks, they often recruit each other for conversation or consultation about interesting or puzzling encounters with text. This conversation and problem solving is not a distraction from literacy learning but perhaps the thread that ties it together. Johnston (2019) has argued that classroom talk mediates children's literacy development. Indeed, when children think together, they can experience improvements in comprehension (Rojas-Drummond, Mazón, Littleton, & Veléz, 2014), expressive language and public speaking (Trickey & Topping, 2004), reasoning ability (Mercer, Wegerif, & Dawes, 1999), and ability to provide reasons and evidence (Latawiec, Anderson, Shufeng, & Kim, 2016), to name just a few academic consequences.

These implications of engagement—the development of competence in reading and vocabulary, improvements in executive function, and expansion of classroom talk, with its associated benefits—are no doubt appealing as potential academic goals. But engagement not only offers improvements in reading and writing, it also touches the breadth of human development in positive ways (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). For instance, important emotional and relational work can happen in the context of engaged reading of narratives. When readers encounter texts that matter to them, they enter the social worlds of the narratives, take up the perspectives of characters and experience their emotional lives, and weigh their moral decisions. There is evidence that this is indeed the case for adult readers (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Kaufman & Libby, 2012), young children (Lysaker, 2019), and adolescents (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, 2015).

These engagements with the minds of characters and with each other, through the compulsion to talk through and about meaningful texts, leads to an expansion of the social imagination (Johnston, 2012), what some might refer to as theory of mind. Turning back to academic consequences, theory of mind has been shown to explain positive differences in reading comprehension (Atkinson, Slade, Powell, & Levy, 2017; Guajardo & Cartwright, 2016). But also, children with strong social imaginations have more positive social skills (Watson, Nixon, Wilson, & Capage, 1999), healthier and more plentiful positive relationships (Caputi, Lecce, Pagnin, & Banerjee, 2012), and better self-regulation (Carlson, Claxton, & Moses, 2015).

It is likely this latter set of consequences of engagement, those dealing with the personal and social dimensions of human development, is most significant to children. When children are engaged, it is unlikely that their priority is “getting better” as reading and writers; rather, they are trying to take control of their personal and social lives both in and out of school (Ivey, 2019). Classrooms prioritizing engaged reading, for instance, had students that reported making friends over books, reading to understand people unlike them, using conversations about books to

ease tensions with family members, and reading to regulate their own emotions and behavior (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, 2015).

What is more, though, is that because they were interested in the social aspects of engagement, they assumed the responsibility of getting other students engaged, served as resources to each other to solve problems around literacy, and helped to shape the curriculum of their English class. In other words, engagement helps to distribute teaching across the classroom. Circling back to Yesenia, Felix, and classmates from the beginning of the chapter, we pointed out that no teacher is mentioned in either scenario, and yet the children appear to be fully engaged, and teaching and supporting each other. In the next section, we suggest theoretical and practical tools teachers can use to create a fertile context for the cognitive, social, emotional, and agentic engagement and consequences we have described here.

What Does This Principle Look Like Being Flexibly Applied in the Classroom?

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Teachers play a crucial role in cultivating a classroom environment in which students are engaged. Once we understand the theories that make engagement likely, we can intentionally arrange for it. Self-determination theory, which is key to understanding engagement, suggests that human motivation requires a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy refers to self-direction and following your own purposes (see Chapter 16). Student choice, particularly when the choices available are relevant to children, contributes to a sense of autonomy. But even when good choices are provided, teachers can inadvertently undermine autonomy by interfering with, monitoring, testing, and attaching assignments to student learning (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002). A sense of competence is acquired when a person feels successful. Like self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), a sense of competence is most likely experienced within student-centered tasks and with feedback that emphasizes the links between student effort and success (McCabe, 2006). A sense of relatedness is felt when individuals interact and connect meaningfully with others. According to self-determination theory, when all three of these needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are met, students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated.

We typically consider motivation to engage as an individual phenomenon, but teachers can maximize engagement when we conceptualize it as a social phenomenon, fueled by the social activity of the classroom. For instance, meaningful classroom conversation and feeling understood and appreciated by others contributes to a sense of autonomy, competence,

and relatedness (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000), so regular opportunities for student-generated talk would expand engagement. Likewise, although the development of interest is often viewed as a solo enterprise, interests often grow out of social influences, such as participation with friends or family in activities that satisfy the need for belonging, vicariously through the interest of others, or through shared cultural values (Bergin, 2016). Theoretically, then, we might optimize engagement not by focusing on one student at a time, per se, but instead by orchestrating social activity so that students are influencing each other in positive ways.

We now turn to two instructional activities in which these theories might be leveraged to support engagement: teacher read-alouds and self-selected reading periods. Woven into and inseparable from each activity is meaningful classroom talk. We focus on student-centered teacher read-alouds and self-selected reading because they are open literacy opportunities in which participation is not limited by level of competence or prior experience, where there is no right or wrong answer, where a range of strategies can be employed, and where there is no ceiling to what can be learned.

Engaging through Teacher Read-Alouds

Teacher read-alouds provide a robust context for inviting children into conversation in which they can think through texts together, problem-solve textual complexity in the open and learn about each other. Although read-alouds are routine in some classrooms, and are frequently used to gear student attention to a particular topic or to teach strategies for comprehension, student engagement in read-alouds will be heightened when children get to determine the course of the conversation and when the goal is not merely to get to the “right” answer or main idea about the text. What does this look like? Consider the following example.

As third-grade teacher Mr. Avery was reading *The Magic Finger* (Dahl, 1999) to his class, he paused along the way and ceded to students the opportunity to talk when events in the book shocked or confused them. For instance, when the main character used her special power to turn her family into geese, the students spontaneously shared their reactions, some delighting and some disagreeing with the character’s decision to force her family to experience how it felt to be hunted. The point of allowing the conversation was not to come to agreement, necessarily, but to allow students to share and access a range of perspectives on the matter, with no expectation of a right answer. It is not surprising that oftentimes the parts of stories that catch students’ attention and that they want to discuss are those offering ethical dilemmas and questions around the mental activity

of the characters. Not coincidentally, as Mr. Avery approached the end of the book, several students decided to read it again on their own. Others selected different books by Dahl that he had highlighted in book talks, anticipating that possibility, and a third group of students decided to read a biography about Roald Dahl.

Earlier in this chapter we referred to research indicating that when students are engaged as readers, they are more likely to execute cognitive strategies when facing difficulty and to persist even in complex texts. In other words, they will do whatever it takes to understand because they want to make sense for their own purposes. The same happens in engaging read-alouds that are supportive of students' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. But in these contexts, the dilemmas are shared openly and become problems for the class to solve. Fourth graders listening to their teacher read *Crenshaw* (Applegate, 2015) were introduced early in the book to the title character, an imaginary large cat who appears in the narrator's life seemingly in times of crisis. When Marcus asked, "Is that cat real?" his classmates were split between yes and no. This student-generated question provided the teacher an opportunity to ask the children how they would resolve their disagreement. Cheyenne suggested a strategy would be to reread and look for hints about whether Crenshaw was real or make-believe. As the teacher revisited several pages, students pointed out clues suggesting the narrator created Crenshaw:

"He made up a name for him, because he didn't have a name."

"He made him like purple jelly beans, he said, 'as much as I do.'"

"He said Crenshaw was a blank slate and he could make him whatever he wanted."

Before moving on, the students mostly agreed that Crenshaw was imaginary, but several said they were still undecided. Although the teacher could have cleared this up the moment the question was asked, this would have not only prevented the children from thinking strategically together but also made it less likely that children would take up this way of problem solving in their own reading.

Engaging through Self-Selected Reading

Drop Everything and Read and sustained silent reading typically refer to the instructional times when students select their own book and read. We worry, though, that these labels limit our imagination for what self-selected reading times can mean for students and their literate development. When students are truly engaged in their reading, they are compelled to talk through and about texts (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Remember

Yesenia and friends in the opening scenario? To demand silence as students read what matters to them is to limit comprehension, the consideration of multiple perspectives, and the inclination to read more, since students get ideas for their next book from hearing others talk about the characters and scenes that perplex or surprise them. Also, meaningful student-to-student talk is essential to supporting relatedness and sustaining engagement. As evidenced with Yesenia and her classmates, students are eager to enter a conversation and move the discussion beyond the author's words to uncover both personal and literary connections and points of uncertainty. When self-selected reading goes beyond "just letting kids read" and encourages connected talk, students engage at a deeper level because strong feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fostered.

So, how do teachers nurture such an environment during self-selected reading? Book talks, encouraging and providing space for student to student talk, and using open-ended prompts to expand student discussions are a few examples. For instance, in Mrs. David's fifth-grade class, book talks are used to whet students' appetites for books they may not find on their own. These may be books new to the classroom library, books she believes her students will find relevant and reflect their lives, or books with a common theme or shared author. During one talk about books with main characters trying to solve a dilemma, she read an excerpt from *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999). After Mrs. David read the part of the book in which the students learn Bud's friend, Bugs, got his name after having a cockroach stuck in his ear, Anthony and Michael gesture from across the room that they want to read that book together. This interaction was seen not as off-task behavior but as a result of being part of a class in which it was normal for students to recruit and guide book choice. After a book talk, Anthony and Michael recruited a third student to read the book with them. Again, since they are reading together, silent reading is not an accurate descriptor of this instructional time because the students may read together and should be encouraged to discuss their reactions to the text.

Along with increased social engagement with text, the responsibility for getting students "into" books is distributed. The teacher still has an important role in fostering open discussions during self-selected reading, but this is more of a supporting role instead of a lead role. We can return to Mrs. David to describe what this looks like in the classroom. As she was listening to her students read and talk about their books, she heard Anthony initiate a conversation about his disappointment with Bud's situation at the end of the book. With the intent of expanding the conversation, she asks questions like "How so?" or "Why might Curtis end his book in this way?" These questions keep the conversations among the students and do not interject her opinion. Finding these opportune moments to

extend and expand student thinking and talk deepens comprehension and reflects a classroom in which literary experiences are collaborative and social interaction is crucial to engagement.

If students have grown accustomed to “silent” reading times and believe that talking while reading is against the rules, they might need to be nudged to interact. Mrs. David, providing copious amounts of time for students to read is essential, but so is the time students spend thinking and discussing the text. Prioritizing extended opportunities to read and talk about text increases the likelihood students will choose to read voluntarily, seek friends that also enjoy reading, and more readily engage in classroom instruction on the text (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; Stanovich, 2008).

There are several strategies to encourage student–student conversation. For instance, teachers who routinely confer with individual students during self-selected reading might decide to invite a third student to listen in on a conference and then recruit that student’s perspectives on what they heard by simply asking, “What are you thinking?” As the teacher walks away, the two students are likely not only to continue to chat but also to chat again on another occasion because of this precedent. A second strategy is to nudge students who have just finished a book to find someone in the class who might like to read that book and share it immediately with that student. Third, teachers might consider setting aside a short time at the end of each reading period to allow any student to say something about their book that is unsettling or interesting. This simple, but powerful strategy helps students to become more aware and interested in the reading experiences of their classmates. The point of all of this is to intentionally turn students toward each other.

Conclusion

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Teachers have an essential role in fostering an engaged community of readers that is rich with reading, writing, and student-initiated talk. For instance, teachers can expand their purposes for reading aloud to include exposing students to a variety of genres. Additional engagement is fostered by advertising new text formats, topics, and authors that beg students to become emotionally and intellectually invested. Then, students can “shop” for books in the classroom library. Additionally, teachers can invite students to write and share their own books (see Ray & Cleaveland, 2018). By normalizing student-driven literacy experiences that engage students in peer discussions before, during, and after reading books of their choice, teachers make it more likely that students will be more intrinsically and socially motivated.

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