THE SOCIAL SIDE OF ENGAGED READING FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

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Me and my group of friends, we'll be, like, sitting in McDonald's, for instance, and we're just teenagers talking about normal stuff, and all of the sudden we'll just be talking about what happened at school, something interesting that you read or something like that.

Eighth grader Johnny seemed to be still trying to grasp this realization as the words came out of his mouth. Could it really be the case that school reading had found its way into his real life, had insinuated itself in conversation with his buddies?

Johnny was not alone. Recently, Peter Johnston and I (Ivey & Johnston, 2013) conducted a study that included Johnny and 70 of his classmates. We were interested in what they had to say about their reading experiences because their teachers had made a decision that would be considered radical in some circles: They shifted to students all decisions about what to read (or not to read) and what to do (if anything) with their reading. They filled their classrooms with books they thought students would find hard to resist, and they fully abandoned the idea of having all students read the same book. They did not require students to create projects on the books they read, answer questions to prove their comprehension, or even write about their books in response journals. They did not present short lessons on cognitive reading strategies and then direct students to practice using the strategies in the books they selected. They did not set goals, or have students set goals, for how many books they might read over the course of the year.

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By the end of the year, students were reading like never before, quite literally. Many students told us that they had never read a book in its entirety before eighth grade, or that they could not remember reading a book since second or third grade. They were reading in language arts class every day in the time their teachers had set aside, but reading did not stop there. They read in other classes, between classes, at lunch, on the bus, into the wee hours of the morning, and on weekends. One student who had grown accustomed to having 20 minutes of reading assigned as homework in previous years described the shift this way: "I [now] set my timer for 20 minutes and when it goes off, I just keep reading for about an hour after that." Even students like this one, who had been compliant in the past, experienced a new kind of reading.

The new reading experience for these students is what researchers consider engagement in reading (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012). When readers are engaged, they are not just going through the motions. Rather, they are "motivated to read, strategic in their approaches to comprehending what they read, knowledgeable in their construction of meaning from text, and socially interactive while reading" (Guthrie et al., 2012, p. 602).

It is this last part, the social dimension, that we found in our own work to be more substantial than previous research has led us to believe,

particularly for young adolescent readers like Johnny and his classmates. Reading for these students was far from a solo act. They talked in and out of school, to friends, peers outside of their social groups, teachers, and family members. They talked during "silent" reading times, at lunch, in math class, on the bus, and via text message and Facebook. In fact, they talked so much that students began to consider it normal, everyday conversation.

Research would suggest that all of this engaged reading would be linked to higher reading achievement and competence (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010), and that was certainly the case among these students. More prominently reported by students, though, was a surprising set of consequences of all this engagement rarely linked to reading in school instructional programs. In addition to describing the ways in which they became more strategic in their reading, students attributed social, emotional, moral, and intellectual development to their reading.

They reported shifts in their academic and social identities, becoming what they had not previously imagined. For instance, a student explained, "I feel like I used to be a very social person, and I'm not a very academic person, but I can actually, like, have conversations about books now, which is kind of weird for me" (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 262). In short, whereas the goals of engaged reading, from an instructional perspective, are typically about getting better at reading, students who were engaged as readers viewed reading as fundamentally about working on relationships, both with others and with themselves.

We were certainly not the first to notice this phenomenon. Rosenblatt (1983) suggested a transactional view of the reading process where the construction of meaning from text and the social nature of reading are intimately connected. Judith Lysaker and her colleagues (Lysaker & Miller, 2012; Lysaker, Tonge, Gauson, & Miller, 2011) have studied how reading can be a site for relational development even for very young children. What we were struck by, however, was how the context these students experienced seemed to promote this kind of learning, particularly since the students themselves were responsible for what they read and what they did with their reading.

In the remainder of this article, I will describe some of the social

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dimensions of engaged reading experienced by middle school students in the engagement-focused classrooms I have been privileged to study for the past few years. I will explain why it matters, and I will suggest what teachers interested in arranging for this type of development might do to help make it happen.

What Is Social About Engaged Reading?

The idea of social activity connected to reading conjures images of students working together to make sense of text. But engaged readers are also social in ways that cannot be observed because it is happening in their minds. That is, it occurs between readers and the text (Rosenblatt, 1983); as Jeanie explained, "You could really picture yourself in that scene, like, you feel like you're with them, and you wish you could be there to help them." Readers simulate the social experience by taking up perspectives of characters in the story and dealing with the conflicts they encounter (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Enrique's comments, for instance, offered these words of caution as he looked through the eyes of a female character of *Living Dead Girl* (Scott, 2008), who had been abducted by a strange man:

> You've got to watch your back. You might think he's nice, but you don't know specifically who he is. Unless you've known him all your life and he's never showed you grief or greed or nothing, then you've got to watch your back.

Engagement triggers feelings with and for characters (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Ted explained to us what that was like when he read *Why I Fight* (Oaks, 2009): "This boy burns his house down, and I was thinking how bad that would feel to burn your house down by accident and then to get blamed for it" (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 263).

Engaged readers, though, hold in their minds multiple viewpoints at once. Toby offered a great example of this. He explained that when he read *Gym Candy* (Deuker, 2007), he found himself mainly inside the head of the main character, who was taking steroids ("like, at random times, he'll fall into a deep, dark depression"), but he also theorized about the thoughts of other characters: "I had the [athletic director] in the back of my mind, just watching the game, just finding more reasons to think he was on steroids."

When Toby and his classmate Gunnar chatted about *Gym Candy*, they entertained a range of perspectives from inside and outside of the text:

Toby   When he was really young… his dad would tell him there's no crying in football. Well, at the end of the book, his mom's sitting there crying next to him, 'cause he had just woken up from a coma from shooting himself…and he starts tearing up, and he thinks to himself, "There's no crying in football." And he just stops. His eyes don't water up or anything…. It kind of made me think that he thinks that football is his life. There's no crying in football, so there's no crying in life.

Gunnar   It's kind of like some people need to cry…to let it out.

He'll never be able to experience that if he just goes by his dad's motto all the time. Like, we have a couple of guys at school here, like, we have this one running back and he runs track and all that kind of stuff. Like, in football season, football is his life and, like, he's always on football. But, like, off-season, he plays sports, but it's not like it's his life.

Toby   But he's the kind of guy you could tell if he was on steroids. He's got that, like, personality that nobody else can have. He's got the respect for adults and his teammates, and he has a lot of friends.

In this example, Toby and Gunnar first problematize the issue by invoking the perspectives of each other; then they bring into play real people from their lives, and there are no clear boundaries between fictional and actual social worlds.

Although students in the classes we studied were not required to read the same book, they often recruited peers to read a book they want to continue thinking about, and students agreed to read the same book so they could talk about it. Clark described a common scene: "We're sitting at lunch, and we're talking about things that happen, and we relate it to things that happen in one of the books. And we usually recommend books to each other. So, we all end up reading the same books by the end." These arrangements were not limited to peers, but also included teachers and family members. The eighth graders reported that family members noticed how much they had started to read, prompting them to

insist that people at home read some of the same texts in order to have conversations about them.

The dialogic engagements, both inside and outside of texts, do not demand the physical presence of the book, so thinking and conversation occur not just during the reading, but long after students have closed the book. Specific lines from books and quotes from characters (and peers) remembered weeks and months later signify particular perspectives that resonate with students or that have created points of uncertainty for them. Quotes, other people (real and fictional), and conversations become tools for thinking about self and others in constantly shifting ways. Students continue the engagement socially because they do not want their thinking to end. In fact, they want to further complicate it. An important contrast would be reading just to be able to answer questions or to demonstrate comprehension, whereby thinking is relatively monolithic and ends when requirements associated with reading are completed.

Why Care About the Social Side of Reading?

There are indeed practical reasons why socially engaged reading matters. For one, it helps to distribute teaching. Because there is collective expertise around books and reading, students come to view each other as resources.

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For instance, Latoya, Renee, and Sheila routinely sat together on the floor and could be observed reading different books silently, but also interrupting each other occasionally for help. Renee described her response to Sheila's questions this way: "I'll see the stuff that she didn't understand, so I might tell her what she doesn't understand in the book."

Consider Charlotte's impromptu explanation to her peers of how she made sense of a difficult book she had just finished:

> I go through the book and see what's in it, to see if it has parts or weird titles of chapters. And I looked through this book, and it has, like, six parts, and the titles of the chapters are lyrics from songs. I do that with most of my books. I write the parts down on a piece of paper and use it as I read.

This offering prompted one student after another to tell the strategies they had used in their books:

- I make [books] about my friends and my family. I put them as the characters.
- In *Identical,* I wrote the names of the two characters, Raeanne and Kayleigh, on Post-It notes and moved them around in the book so I could keep them straight.
- Or, like, booktalking with people who have already read it. Making connections with people who know the book, like me and Zoe do.

Students not only listen and take up their peers' strategies as possibilities they had not yet imagined, but they also offer advice on getting through particular parts of books they have read. "Push through and it will get better" was an effective strategy we often heard eighth-grade readers telling each other but that would seldom be invoked in lessons on comprehension. Experience

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and trust in the context of a relational network made this strategy useful in ways that would not have been so in the reading of a required text or in cases where reading is considered an individual act.

But there is a different set of reasons why socially engaged reading matters. Students report that the talk itself changes their relationships with each other. Sasha put it this way: "Like you're compatible with these people. Like, I never thought I'd be compatible with that person…they just change my mind a little bit, and they see what I think about." Because the compulsion to talk about books is often so great, students will talk to peers outside of their own social groups. Lucy observed at the end of eighth grade, "People are less in cliques and groups than we were last year. So, I think that's a step closer to actually being united." Students even reported making new friends over books. What is more, they begin to see themselves collectively as "smarter."

There is a hugely significant consequence, though, that likely starts with the dialogical engagement within books as discussed earlier. When a reader can entertain the perspectives of several characters at once, it enables him or her to be able to predict the implications of one character's actions on the thoughts and feelings of the other. Amazingly enough, this can carry over into actual worlds, with students taking seriously

the potential repercussions of their own actions on others. Sami makes this clear as she reflects on *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2007):

> I realized the way I treated people might cause more than I was realizing. Like, if I said a name and I thought it was funny, they might take it the wrong way and end up doing things because of me. Because the book was about this girl, Hannah, and all these 13 people were the reasons why she killed herself. And all of them had reasons that they didn't think were that big, but they were, like, humongous reasons why she did it. And I didn't realize that until I kept going through the book, and I thought, these might be stupid reasons, but they were reasons that meant a lot to her.

Likewise, Paul disclosed after reading *Leverage* (Cohen, 2011), "I think I could have been nicer to people." Engaged middle school readers take up the moral and ethical dispositions developed in narrative worlds and apply them to their actual social worlds, and this is consistent with research on engaged reading of narratives among adults (Bal, Butterman, & Bakker, 2011; Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Mar, Oatley, Hirsch, dela Paz, & Peterson, 2006). Student descriptions of their reading suggested the reduction of stereotypes and prejudice.

Remarkably, the goals of so-called anti-bullying programs are often realized in engaged reading and conversation. Students like Lindsay came to believe they could make a moral difference:

> I read a couple of books where people get bullied, and it changes my mind, 'cause in a couple of books I read, people commit suicide for it. And in *Hate List* [by Jennifer Brown], that book is really good, and it changes my mind about how people feel about things. And even, like, a little comment can change someone's life. And, like, the other day, I saw people on Facebook picking on this one girl, like, saying nobody liked her because she was ugly and had no friends. And I kind of put a stop to it. I told them it was wrong and that people commit suicide for it all the time. So, it changed my way of seeing things. Normally I wouldn't have said anything to stop. But now, if I see anything, I stop it. (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 263)

Related is that seeing others differently demands new ways of thinking about yourself. Being a part of a vigorous relational network of engaged reading, conversation, and exposure to multiple perspectives (both fictional and real) inspires students to rework their own life narratives. Students believe that others can change for the better, and in turn, that they can change themselves. Layla described the phenomenon this way:

> I used to be—I was a person who was, like, very guarded, and if you didn't like me, then that's your problem, and I'm who I am. So if you have a problem with me, get over it. And then, like, reading… it made me sit back and question it. So it's been like, I've been a nicer person, but I'm more energetic.

Turning Up the Social Side of Reading

So far, I have said little about where teachers are in all of this socializing. Make no mistake, though, a teacher's role in leveraging social activity around reading is essential. I mentioned previously that the eighth-grade teachers with whom I worked made a primary decision that in order to arrange for students to be engaged, they needed to support students' autonomy by presenting compelling options for reading and then allowing students to make their own choices. Relatedly, there was no minimum requirement for reading and no related assignments. Elsewhere, I have described how teachers might think about the reading materials young adolescents find relevant to them (Ivey, 2011). I want to emphasize that without serious support of students' sense of autonomy and relevance in their reading, deep engagement is not likely (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Klauda, 2012), particularly for students who are often marginalized in conventional classroom practices.

Beyond that, some intentional everyday practices are in order. First, make it a habit to invite dialogical engagements with texts. When teacher Ellen talks about characters to her students, for instance, she might say "I got so frustrated with [this character]" or "I am feeling [this character's] disappointment" or "I suspect [this character] is thinking…." In short, draw students' attention to the mental activity of characters.

Second, expect that students will want to talk, allow it to happen even during "silent" reading, and arrange for it to happen regularly with the whole class, prioritizing what students bring to the conversation from their own reading. Ellen routinely asks, "Is anyone just itching to say something about their book?" Students realize that a provocative quote or an unsettling detail will draw collective focus to their book. Joey, for instance, capitalized on such an opportunity by sharing that the main character of a book he had just

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started was intent on breaking every bone in his body (*Break*, Moskowitz, 2009), prompting his classmates to hypothesize about what would make a person engage in such self-destructive activity. This conversation was brought to bear in subsequent conversations across the year involving other books with shared qualities but that other students read. Conversation, then, is not an isolated event; it is instead continuous and constantly developing as new perspectives are added. Ellen made it a point to help make these connections (e.g., "Remember last month what Joey told us about the character in *Break*?").

Third, deliberately turn students toward each other. When a student finishes reading a particular book, Ellen typically asks, "Who else might like that book?" and then suggests, "Go over and talk to him about that," regardless of how well the students know each other or how much they ordinarily talk to each other. Ellen's colleague Julia makes it a point to invite other students to listen in when she confers with students over their reading. Unfailingly, the "observers" will be drawn into the conversation, which can continue even in the absence of the teacher. Relatedly, invite students to describe to the whole class the details of conversations that sprang up in small groups, thereby expanding the conversation to include an even greater range of minds.

Turning up the social side of reading does not force us to ignore the dimensions of literacy development that many of us have grown

accustomed to thinking about and planning for—that is, for students to become strategic readers in increasingly complex texts. The middle school readers we studied were remarkably strategic, but that happened in the context of engagement. For instance, students reported rereading books in their entirety when they reached the end a bit confused but bound and determined to understand. They selected books beyond their personal comfort zones and then stretched themselves to make sense of them, often inventing their own strategies. Because students employed (and created) sophisticated strategies with great regularity and were quite resourceful when they required assistance, their teachers determined that there was a lesser need to teach strategies explicitly and to assign practice of strategies in less authentic contexts. This reduction in strategy instruction, then, made it possible for students to devote more than a third of their 90-minute language arts block to their own reading and conversation.

In the remainder of class time, which included a daily teacher read-aloud and writing workshop time, teachers invited students' experiences from their own reading into further conversations about strategic reading, literacy concepts, and the craft of writing. For instance, in a read-aloud when Ellen asked the class, "Do you think [the character] can be more than a static character?" she emphasized and named a term related to a character development concept, but she also

invited a conversation about the possible decisions a character (or a real person) might make. Students spontaneously contributed instances of change, possible change, or lack of change in characters from other books. Class conversations about writing are also enhanced by students' collective knowledge about books. In a discussion of a "show, don't tell" approach to descriptive writing, for instance, Ellen invited particular students to share from their books helpful excerpts in which the author had created compelling images. These contributions to whole-class thinking are possible because students have read so widely, because there is substantial talk about their reading (among students and between teachers and students), and because members of the classroom community know a great deal about what others have read.

A Social Cost of Not Attending to the Social Side of Reading?

The young adolescent readers that we studied, supported by their teachers, made reading a deeply relational, intellectual, and moral enterprise. They did so without sacrificing achievement on the narrow set of academic outcomes shaped by high-stakes tests (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Engaged readers in a relationally vibrant learning community remind us that reading cannot be reduced to a mere technical skill (Fecho, 2013). When we attend to the social side of reading, students become more comfortable with others and with themselves. We might ask, why is this dimension of literacy learning—the development of the whole person in relationship with others—not a central focus of our professional growth as literacy educators and a deliberate goal of literacy programs?
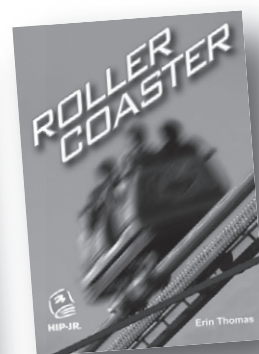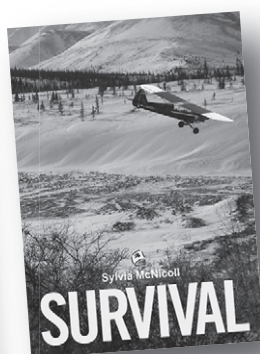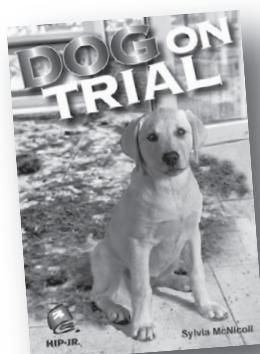
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