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# Engaging the Disengaged: Using Every Trick in the Book

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**ISABELLE FARRINGTON COLLEGE OF EDUCATION**

**April 24, 2018**

This is to certify that the action research study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,

and that any and all revisions as required by

CT Literacy Specialist Program have been made.

**College of Education**

**Department of Leadership and Literacy**

***EDR 692 - Applied Reading and Language Arts Research***

***Engaging the Disengaged: Using Every Trick in the Book***

***Advisor: Dr. Karen C. Waters***

### **Abstract**

Researchers have affirmed a connection between students' engagement in reading to their academic achievement. Struggling readers in particular are generally not engaged or motivated to read. While the construct of *reading engagement* is difficult to measure, a student's motivation seems to be the driving force behind reading development. Additionally, today's students are involved in and more motivated by the many different activities outside of school, which poses challenges for both teachers and parents. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of instructional techniques on student engagement in reading. To measure the academic progress of 21 fifth grade students over the course of a six-week intervention period, we considered two data points: the DRA2 and Serravallo's (2014) Engagement Inventory. The engagement survey recorded students' behaviors before, during, and after the intervention period, while the DRA2 measured reading achievement before and after the six weeks. Student behavior was coded to analyze the findings of the engagement surveys, which led to three major themes for increasing engagement: (1) the use of choice within the classroom such as seating, text, genre and assessments; (2) the use of authentic tasks to connect reading to the real world; and (3) collaboration with peers in literacy related tasks. An increase in students' overall reading achievement affirmed the effectiveness of student choice, authentic tasks, and peer collaboration on student motivation. Additionally, the implementation of regular, ongoing opportunities to engage in student self-selection of text and collaborate with peers these themes resulted in a higher student self-efficacy in literacy.

*Keywords: reading engagement, motivation, choice, collaboration, authentic tasks, achievement, engagement*

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## **Section 1: Introduction**

Struggling readers are not engaged or motivated to read (Hall, 2006). Reading engagement demonstrates the involvement and ownership students have in their own reading development (Marchand & Furrer, 2014; Wigfield, et al., 2008). While it is hard to measure, a student's motivation seems to be the driving force behind reading development (Varuzza, et al., 2014). Students today are involved and more motivated in the many different activities outside of school, which poses challenges for both teachers and parents (Majid & Tan, 2007).

Student motivation and engagement are often seen as barriers to the success of adolescent literacy intervention (Kamil, et al., 2008; O'Brien, Beach, & Scharber, 2007). However, through intervention, specific strategies to foster motivation and reading engagement are a rarity (Kim, et al., 2016). Struggling readers struggle to remain engaged due to many different factors. For instance, students who feel a stigma of reading a certain type of book may be reluctant to continue reading (Guo, et al., 2015). Students who are aware of their low reading level are afraid of the stigma associated with specific texts. Consequently, students' pure enjoyment for reading has disappeared over time (2015).

Students who are intrinsically motivated will naturally perform better, because they are more interested, or curious, as opposed to students who are just performing in hopes of recognition or because they "have to" (Varuzza et al., 2014). Overall, educators are challenged to work with both levels of motivation and work to achieve student learning success under both accounts (2014).

## Background

Struggling readers have difficulties remaining engaged during literacy lessons because of the grade level reading texts as well as the learning content being too difficult for them to understand ( Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). There are reading stigmas associated with upper elementary school aged children that are significantly below grade level. Students notice that the texts have a different appearance: more pictures and thinner spine due to shorter text creating a negative stigma (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). These texts are often considered less desirable and some struggling readers have been known to call them “baby” books creating a stigma against reading appropriate books at their independent reading level. This is due to the fact that these students are unable to understand grade level texts, or have a lack of choice in their independent reading (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010).

A typical classroom consists of two types of students: engaged and disengaged. Students who appear engaged are noted by looking at the teacher, sitting up straight, and look to be paying attention, while students who appear to be disengaged are avoiding eye contact with the teacher, playing inside their desk, or looking out the window (Fisher et al., 2018).

Engagement in the classroom is based on effective behavioral and cognitive components within the classroom (Parsons et al., 2015; Parsons et al., 2014). Cognitive engagement is noted through student/teacher discourse within the classroom (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012; Parsons et al., 2015). Behavioral engagement is easily observed from students postures and eye contact on the speaker (Fisher et.al, 2018). In order for students to achieve, it is important for students to be engaged both cognitively and behaviorally (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Students who are engaged both cognitively and behaviorally are proven to be more successful academically (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

### **Rationale**

In order for students to be successful learners, they need to be actively engaged in their reading. Engagement is a vital component of classroom instruction because it is “explicitly associated with reading achievement” (Parsons et al., 2015). For students to continue to build successful futures, remain employed after college and become lifelong learners, students need to be engaged in the classroom starting back in elementary school, where the initial decline is noticed (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Kuh, et al., 2008; Naeghel, et al., 2012).

Based on the high demand of literacy throughout all content areas, it is essential that students learn how to engage in all different types of texts to make them successful across different disciplines (NGA & CCSS, 2010). Therefore, struggling readers who frustrate easily, disengage from literary related tasks, will impede their further development in their academics (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010).

Although struggling readers tend to disengage from reading, using different strategies to engage them, will allow students to help improve their academic performance. By allowing students to have choice in their learning, it will improve their reading abilities (Fisher et al., 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

Engagement for struggling readers is an elusive construct (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010). Students who struggle to read grade level texts are quick to become disengaged in learning due to the difficulties they have comprehending grade level texts, as well as the stigma associated with their independent texts (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014)

With the lack of engagement and volume, students tend to fall further behind their peers, (Allington, 2013). Struggling readers, who do not have serious cognitive challenges, have unusually low motivations (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014), which lead to disengagement, and present as a lack of effort, attention, and persistence. Ultimately, limited engagement, low self-esteem, and motivation result in lower reading achievement (Allington, 2014).

According to the Gallup's 2014 student poll, 47% of fifth through twelfth grade students report being disengaged while in school (Collier, 2015). Even though the high school graduation rate is on the rise, there is a decrease in the number of students completing four-year college degrees (2015). According to the Journal of Higher Education, 40% of students do not complete their college degree. This is the world rate of college completion compared to other parts of the developed world and is attributed to the lack of engagement in classes within their field of study (Kuh et al., 2008). The time to address this problem is at the onset of reading difficulties.

### **Solution**

Research states that students who are motivated and engaged are academically successful (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). Classrooms where students have choice over texts that interest them, where students have a voice in how they share their ideas and theories about texts in personal and meaningful ways, we see an increase with engagement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Guthrie et al., 2012). In classrooms where teachers relinquish control, students develop deeper connections to content and engage in academic tasks because they are empowered through choice (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010).

This paper will explore the possibilities of providing struggling readers with an array of strategies to sustain motivation and engagement while encouraging them to be academically successful.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this study, motivation and engagement is the key to the success of struggling students in their literacy development. Students who are engaged are “intrinsically motivated to read” (Guthrie as cited by Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p.64) by spending 500% more of their time reading than disengaged readers (2006). Based on this theory, engaged readers use metacognitive strategies to build their understanding, are active thinkers, and discuss their most recent reading with others (2006; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Through the Engagement Theory, as well as the Metacognitive Theory, Guthrie created Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (2004), where students increase motivation, and metacognitive skills along with gains in conceptual knowledge (Anderson & Guthrie, 1996 as cited by Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Through the use of choice in reading instruction, hands on activities, a wide variety of text choices and collaboration with others (2006), students will learn to become actively engaged in reading. Based on the theory, proficient readers mentally engage with texts while reading in order to increase comprehension.

### **Research Questions**

It is clear that further information is needed in order for teachers to be able to effectively motivate and engage struggling readers within the classroom. Once teachers understand what makes a struggling reader engaged, they will be able to provide appropriate strategies to their students. This project will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the effective strategies to increase overall student engagement in reading?
2. What are the strategies used to engage and motivate older struggling readers?
3. What impact does choice have on student engagement?

## Section 2: Review of Literature

### *Introduction*

Engagement has long been a topic of interest for researchers because it denotes students' performance within the classroom. For decades, teachers and researchers have advocated for interesting materials to enhance students' engagement both cognitively and behaviorally (Fisher et al., 2018; Guthrie, 1996; Guthrie 2011; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Kim et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2015; Unrau & Quirk, 2014). Engagement is a vital component of classroom instruction because it is explicitly associated with reading achievement (Parsons et al., 2015).

### *Historical Perspectives on Reading*

John Dewey (1913) claimed that when students are engaged in their learning, they will work to master the skills and task at hand. However, the perception of engagement has been misinterpreted as time-on-task, which is actually only one important aspect of reading engagement (Brophy & Good, 1986 as cited by Parsons et al., 2014). Over the years struggling readers have similarly exhibited the tendency to become disengaged with the tasks of literacy.

One of the first known tools used to teach reading and engage students to want to learn to read, was the McGuffey Readers. In 1835, William McGuffey developed four original McGuffey readers, in which the text gradually became more difficult (Vail, 1911). The intent of the readers was not only to teach the student how to read, beginning with Book One, but also to entice students to want to keep reading. In order to do this, McGuffey believed teachers should learn along with their students, conduct read alouds, ask challenging and insightful questions to make

sure students understood the text (1911). Throughout the 19th century, McGuffey was responsible for creating a generation of gifted readers.

To illustrate these concepts, the range of the McGuffey Readers included religious, moral and ethical stories about having value and being “good” (Vail, 1911). They presented stories emphasizing the strength of the characters, truth and the overarching quality of being good. The purpose of these readers, was to resonate with children and peak their interest by using fables and animals throughout the stories (1911). An example of this can be found in McGuffey’s Fifth Reader. The Fifth Reader instructed students to read with inflection, expression, emphasis and articulation (McGuffey, 1879). In the story, *The Good Reader* (see Figure 1), the moral of the story teaches students that being good will allow them greatness in life (1879).

Throughout the years, reading engagement was defined as the joint functioning of motivations and strategies used during reading (Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992). For this to occur, Rosenblatt (1969, 1982) claimed that readers need to live through a book to become engaged in the text. The transaction between the text and the reader is necessary in order for the reader to experience the joy of reading (1982). When students fully emerge themselves into a text, their understanding deepens allowing students to develop their own perspectives, opinions, and beliefs (Weih, 2014). Overall, reading achievement can be seen through different constructs of engagement and motivation in literature.

### *Engaged Reading*

Engagement within the classroom is vital since it directly corresponds to reading achievement (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Engagement within the classroom proves to be most effective when it emphasizes interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm (Parsons et al, 2014).

According to Skinner and Pitzer (2012), “engagement is a robust predictor of students’ learning,

grades, achievement test scores, retention, and graduation” (p.21). Engagement is the only way for students to learn continuously and be academically successful (2012).

However, reading engagement declines rapidly as students’ progress through their elementary school years (Kim et al., 2016; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995; Parsons et al., 2015), decreasing the motivation to participate in engaging activities to improve reading achievement (Kamil et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2016). Student motivation and engagement are often barriers to the success of literacy interventions (Kamil et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2016).

The distinction between being on task and being engaged is easily perceived in a student’s behavior. Students who are on task appear to be engaged (Parsons et al., 2014), but are they? A student who is on task, or dedicated, is able to complete the academic requirements set by the teacher or the lesson (Guthrie, 2015; Parsons et al., 2014; Unrau & Quirk, 2014,); this is also known as behavioral engagement. Further, behavioral engagement can be measured by observations of student effort, attention, and dedication to academic tasks (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Kim et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2015). A student who is behaviorally-engaged is not necessarily deep in cognitive thought. In short, a student’s commitment to the completion of a task does not automatically imply he is fully-engaged with the task. For students to increase academically, they need to be cognitively engaged (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014) where they enhance their metacognitive effectiveness of the text (2014; Parsons et al., 2015).

### *Motivation*

It has been determined that motivation and engagement are key to the success of struggling students in their literacy development. Through the motivational theory, students who spend 500% more of their time reading are known to be intrinsically motivated to read (Guthrie as cited by Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Based on this theory, motivated readers will use

metacognitive strategies to further build their understanding of topics, become active thinkers and discuss reading more frequently with others (2006; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Motivation is the term used to demonstrate one's commitment to a learning experience (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). The three types of motivation used to increase student engagement in the classroom include extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy. Attending to motivation must be considered when students work in texts beyond their independent levels (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Robertson et al., 2014), which means the teacher needs to go beyond choosing a high interest text or task. In addition to using high interest texts, teachers need to build in motivation into the classroom through goals, choice, collaboration and instructional authenticity (Robertson et al., 2014).

Extrinsic motivation is referred to as seeking rewards for excelling in reading or reaching goals (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Varuzza et al., 2014) with the expectation of receiving a reward for a job well done. However, Guthrie (2011) determined students who receive rewards for reading consequently do not motivate students in the long run. Therefore, it encourages students to become more interested in the reward than learning the skill to help them grow as readers.

Intrinsic motivation refers to the student's internal motivation to do something well without regard for a token or reward. For example, a student with internal motivation wants to be successful simply because he wants to learn, and reads to satisfy an internal interest and curiosity (Guthrie & Humenick, 2014; Guthrie & Klauda, 2014; Kim et al, 2016; Varuzza et al., 2014). Students who are motivated internally have their own desires and interests that they can access through reading, allowing them to remain engaged and motivated to do well (Guthrie & Humenick, 2014). Additionally, students who are intrinsically motivated realize the importance

of reading, which, when affirmed by parents and teachers, further increases students' motivation to do well (2014).

Introduced by Bandura and grounded in social cognitive theory, the multifaceted principles of self-efficacy are manifested through persistence and confidence in self-directing a course of action in the face of adversity, and includes the extent to which coping is employed to diminish or eradicate a defensive behavior (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy refers to a student's self-perception or belief that he has the ability to read well (Guthrie & Humenick, 2014; Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). A student who exhibits self-efficacy tackles reading with confidence with the belief and the resolve that he is able to confront challenges and persevere in the face in the adversity. In doing so, he increases his own sense of self-efficacy because he has confronted a threat to his confidence, and has prevailed.

Meanwhile, students who lack self-efficacy, experience difficulty in sustaining effort in learning new skills in literacy, and subsequently lack the growth mindset when approached with more difficult concepts and passages (2014).

### *Components of Building Reading Engagement*

Students who are engaged are critical, use cognitive tools, and collaborate with others (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). Parsons et al. (2015) and Robertson et al. (2014) evaluated how authenticity, collaboration, choice, challenge and sustained reading support reading engagement.

In a yearlong qualitative study to evaluate student engagement in 6th grade class of six students, Parsons et al. (2015) concluded that students gravitated to the most engaging tasks, which consisted of teacher-supported academic work and collaborative work with peers. Alternatively, when presented with tasks beyond their instructional level, students' interest and

engagement tended to decrease. Data collection consisted of a rubric (Parsons et al, 2015) whose criteria included the extent to which the task could be authenticated within the context of classroom literacy activities, the amount of student collaboration involved, if an appropriate amount of challenge was embedded within the task, whether the task offered student choice, and whether the activity yielded sustained learning. Parsons et al. (2015) concluded that task design is important when thinking of student engagement.

Parsons et al., (2015) discussed the need to provide application of authentic learning experiences to the classroom context and its connection to the outside world, which demonstrates real purpose in students' daily lives. Authentic tasks increase engagement as they motivate students to connect both their academic and daily lives (Duke et al., 2006; Guthrie & Klauda, 2014; Parsons et al., 2015). Robertson et al. (2014) informs that instruction should be coherent with students' lives outside of the classroom in order to build motivation and transfer skills. Through authentic and meaningful work, students will continue to build motivation and self-efficacy (2014).

Further, collaboration and choice assist students in remaining engaged in literacy tasks. When students interact collaboratively with one another during reading tasks, they deepen their understanding and increase their confidence and self-efficacy in their learning (Kim et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2015; Robertson et al., 2014).

The construct of collaboration was affirmed through Strategic Adolescent Reading Intervention (STARI), inclusive of partner assisted fluency, reciprocal teaching of comprehension strategies, partner reading, response to texts, and peer debates (Kim et al., 2016). Working with peers allows students to feel a better sense of reading readiness (2016; Robertson et al., 2014). Meanwhile, collaborative activities that also include choice, motivate students to

read (Guthrie, 2011; Guthrie, 2015; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Paris, Wasik, and Turner (1991) noted that in conjunction with choice, students who create their own goals and figure out how to meet them are engaged in their own learning through intrinsic motivation.

Lastly, engaging academic tasks also need to be challenging for students to remain motivated (Parsons et al., 2015; Robertson et al., 2014). Such texts need to be complex and open ended enough to support sophisticated reasoning (Kim et al., 2016). The teacher needs to create tasks that are challenging to help students cognitively. To do this, teachers build students skills to create a complex repertoire to assist with their conceptual knowledge of the text. As students meet challenges, their motivation increases as they begin to see direct success (Robertson et al., 2014).

Parsons et al. (2015) identified five components used to increase reading engagement. These components are authenticity, collaboration, choice, challenge and sustained reading. Through the use of a rubric, students were evaluated based on these five areas concluding that authenticity, choice, and challenge in reading tasks, appeared the most engaging.

### *CORI Engagement Instruction*

Through the Engagement Theory, as well as the Metacognitive Theory, Guthrie created Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (1996), where students increase motivation, and metacognitive skills along with gains in conceptual knowledge (Anderson & Guthrie, 1996 as cited by Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Research on CORI identified key features of instruction to support motivation such as relevance (Guthrie, 2004), integration of skills and content, hands on activities, variety of text choices, as well as increasing independence and collaboration with peers (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014; Kim et al., 2016; Tracey & Morrow, 2006)students learn to

become actively engaged in reading. Based on the theory, proficient readers mentally engage with texts while reading in order to increase comprehension.

One of the most in depth research on engagement came from the many studies carried out by Guthrie and his colleagues at the NRRC. During the initial study on Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI), Guthrie et al. (1996) connected the relationship between engagement and how teachers present reading strategies meanwhile focusing on concepts rather than just the reading skills themselves. Guthrie et al. (1996) studied 140 third and fifth grade students from two elementary schools in a diverse suburban school district along the mid-Atlantic coast. All of the students were taught by teachers who were specifically trained in CORI.

The CORI framework consisted of four instructional phases: observe and personalize, search and retrieve, comprehend and integrate, and communicate. The first step was to engage students in literacy by providing opportunities to observe concrete objects and events across different context areas (Guthrie et al., 1996). Proceeding further, students brainstormed questions about concepts interesting to themselves, making the learning more personal and engaging (1996). Following, teachers then explicitly taught students how to search for answers to their questions using different resources utilizing the classroom and school libraries while learning the importance of different text features (1996). Next, teachers facilitate the comprehension and integration of texts with students' prior knowledge by teaching strategies for summarizing, determining key details, and making comparisons (1996). Finally, once students were confident in their chosen topic, teachers provided instruction based on one's own preference in how to present their topic to their audience either through oral, written, and visual formats (1996).

Guthrie et al., (1996) concluded that literacy engagement of the elementary school students who experienced CORI increased significantly throughout the yearlong study. Based on the different aspects of CORI, students increased their engagement through different constructs. These included a focus on specific concepts rather than individualized reading skills, students initiating their own learning through question generation, allowing different opportunities for choice within literacy and collaborative aspect of working with peers (Guthrie et al., 1996).

### *STARI Engagement Instruction*

CORI adds motivation into the intervention program to influence the design of STARI - Strategic Adolescent Reading Intervention (Kim et al., 2016) to increase reading engagement.

STARI is designed to work on integral skills such as decoding, fluency, and morphological analysis while cognitively challenging different content areas (Kim et al., 2016). This allows students to connect basic reading skills to their importance not only within the classroom but life as well (2016). To demonstrate this, in STARI Unit 2.2 on the September 11 attacks students apply syllable division rules to words such as *collapse* and *accuse* (2016) followed by practicing these skills and the new patterns learned in other non-fiction texts.

Kim et al (2016) examined reading intervention for middle school students using the STARI program. The participants included 483 students randomly selected to participate in a control group or the STARI group. Several forms of engagement were measured during this study: behavioral - how much of the STARI program was completed by students throughout the year - and emotional and cognitive engagement by the intervention teachers' completed rating scales on students' participation.

After a year, the study results showed that the control group had little to no gains in their literacy skills (Kim et al., 2016), even though many of the control group students participated in other literacy programs outside of STARI. Students', who participated in STARI, outperformed the control group on different measures of word recognition, morphological awareness and basic reading comprehension (2016). In addition, students proved to be engaged behaviorally by completing the literacy tasks (i.e. STARI workbook) as compared to the control group. Lastly, the intervention teachers noted that students were emotionally and cognitively engaged based on their observations of students in the STARI group compared to the control group (2016). Therefore, this study proved that with the use of the STARI program, students' engagement will increase for literary tasks.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, choice, collaboration, interest, and authenticity are the critical components of reading programs that encourages students to increase their reading achievement due to all of the components are working together. These four components build literacy engagement allowing students to succeed academically by continuing to build their motivation. In 1996, Guthrie and colleagues developed CORI establishing the need for students to be engaged during literacy tasks by concluding the need for choice, collaboration, and integration throughout the task. This study was the driving force for many studies in reading engagement including the development of STARI.

Meanwhile, Parsons and colleagues (2015) used the basis of CORI to establish a rubric to evaluate students' engagement within the classroom. The rubric consisted of five main components consisting of authenticity, collaboration, choice, challenge and sustained reading (Parsons et al., 2015). In conjunction with Guthrie et al., (1996), Parsons' study exemplifies the

importance authenticity, choice and collaboration. Even though Parsons' evaluated other aspects of engagement, these three components are the most beneficial to increasing student engagement.

STARI took the components of engagement from the initial CORI study and further developed the intervention into three levels of engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional (Kim et al., 2016). STARI focused primarily on the connection between the integral parts of reading, such as decoding, and the content area. This allowed students to authenticate their learning to their life through different aspects of interacting with other students. As claimed through Parsons et al. (2015) and Guthrie et al. (1996), collaboration is a key factor in building reading engagement. Therefore, STARI's driving force was building engagement through collaboration with peers.

Researchers unanimously agree that three non-negotiable requirements need to be in place in order for students to be successful readers: There needs to be collaboration, authenticity and choice in reading for students to be successful (Duke et al., 2006; Guthrie et al., 1996; Guthrie, 2011; Guthrie, 2015; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Kim et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2015). The integration of the three elements is the domain of the teacher or facilitator, whose success is contingent upon the expertise that the teacher brings to the classroom. Therefore, reading engagement is a key player of academic assets that takes place over the student's entire educational career.

### **Section 3: Methodology**

#### *Introduction*

For years, researchers have attested to the importance of student engagement as the key to literacy success (Fisher et al., 2018; Guthrie, 1996; Guthrie 2011; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Kim et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2015; Unrau & Quirk, 2014). In order for students to achieve and be academically successful, it is important for students to be engaged both cognitively and behaviorally (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

Throughout various studies, researchers have explored the significance of student choice, authentic academic tasks, peer collaboration, and teacher involvement in reading engagement. This action research project specifically investigated the role of choice, authenticity, and collaboration with peers in promoting literacy engagement in an upper elementary school setting. This project aimed to provide strategies for educators to effectively increase reading engagement in their classroom.

#### *Participants*

The participants in this study attended a suburban, public elementary school in the Northeast region of the United States. The student population of the district included approximately 1,855 elementary students divided amongst five elementary schools. The population of students within the district was 75.3% White, 4.4% Asian, 15.5% Hispanic or Latino, and 6.5% Black or African American (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE], 2017) and 3.6% identify as two or more races. Within the population, there were 10.7% English Language Learners (ELL) and 13.9% who are students with disabilities (CSDE, 2017).

Only one of the five elementary schools in the district participated in this action research project on student engagement in reading. As the facilitator of this project, I selected 21 students through convenience sampling. Group participants attended kindergarten through sixth grade elementary school with an enrollment of 446 students. Racial diversity accounted for 23% of the student population. This includes, 14.1% Hispanic/Latin, 2.9% Asian American, 2.7% African American, and 3.3% are two or more races. Students with disabilities accounted for 17.2% of the student population while English Language Learners (ELL) account for 8.5% of the school population.

The participating class consisted of students heterogeneously formed by gender and academic abilities at the end of the previous school year. At the beginning of the study, 62% of the students were reading at least one level below the expected grade level benchmark as measured by the Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA2), 14.3% of students were reading at the grade level benchmark and 23.8% of students were reading one grade level above district benchmarks. As the facilitator of this project, I had eight years of classroom experience and have recently earned state certification in remedial reading. I provided for instruction in all subjects from reading, writing, math, science and social studies.

The duration of the study occurred over an eight week period in the middle of the school year. By that point in the year, students were familiar with their teacher, their classroom routines and learning environment. Although the small sample of 21 students and one teacher, was not a sufficient size for me to generalize my results, the intent of this action research project was to identify effective ways of engaging students in reading within my own classroom using research based strategies. If successful, I would be better positioned to conduct professional development around engagement strategies and may be able to replicate the study using a greater sample.

### *Materials*

The DRA2 (Beaver & Carter, 2011) is a formative reading assessment in which teachers are able to systematically observe, record, and evaluate changes in student reading performance. It is a proven, criterion-referenced assessment which includes recommendations for scaffolded support to increase student reading proficiency. A student's independent reading level, indicated by the DRA2 level reflects the student's oral reading fluency of 95% accuracy and comprehension of 90% at independent performance levels (Beaver & Carter, 2011).

Additionally, a reading survey was administered to students at the start of the action research project (see Figure 2). This instrument provided information about student preferences and the personal motivators for each student and an opportunity to ensure that high interest texts were readily available in the classroom. Based on the survey, a wide selection of reading material was collected and available across all genres and type of literature. Other resources used during the project included a variety of charts to engage and serve as reference tools for the students such as the Book Club “Talk” Chart (see Figure 3).

Finally, students were evaluated during independent tasks based on Serravallo's Engagement Inventory (SEI) adapted from Serravallo's *The Literacy Teacher's Playbook, Grades 3-6* (2014) to gather data based on their literacy engagement (see Figure 4). During five minute increments, students' reading behavior was recorded using a coding system (see Figure 5). This served as a baseline to gauge students' behavioral engagement prior to the start of the study as well as a continuous measure of engagement throughout the eight weeks. Even though this inventory only measures behavioral engagement during literacy tasks, it is useful to track trends in students overall.

### *Instrumentation*

Over the course of a six week period, I used different strategies to engage students in literacy tasks. In order to learn more about each child's interest and reading behaviors, I conducted and evaluated a reading interest survey, as well as the SEI (2014) (see Figure 4). The SEI (2014) required the teacher to observe students' behaviors at five minute intervals for a total of thirty minutes. The baseline was completed on three different occasions to retrieve an average of engagement for each student. Each occasion targeted a different literacy task: independent reading, collaborative group work, and written responses. Over the six weeks, the teacher administered the SEI (2014) bi-weekly for each targeted literacy task, resulting in a total of three data sets collected for each activity. The last set also served as the post-assessment for this study.

I collected different texts from books, magazines and articles related to students' interests based on the interest survey. Students were given the power to choose texts that interested them during daily literacy tasks. In addition to being able to choose their own texts to read, students also had a choice of seating. The classroom has bean bags, stools, chairs, and carpets for students to choose their preference in seating. Furthermore, students also have the choice over their assessments they choose to create based on their text. Students can choose which format to best display knowledge of the text through different media formats.

To engage with peers, the students received explicit instruction on accountable talk in literacy. Using the Book Talk "Talk" chart (see Figure 2), students learned language to communicate with their peers effectively when having discussions around reading. Students also participated in book clubs and grand conversations to engage in more accountable talk relating to literacy that allowed them to deepen their literary insights.

The final element was to introduce authenticity of literacy-related tasks to connect school to the outside world. In order to do this, the teacher thoughtfully created performance tasks and reading activities that related to other content areas. For example, students were asked to apply reading strategies to decipher information from articles on current events using interactive websites such as NEWSELA or the local newspaper

## **Part 4: Data Collection and Analysis**

### *Introduction*

The goal of this study was to measure which strategies are effective in increasing student engagement in reading. In order to measure the literacy achievement of fifth grade students based on their engagement within the tasks, I considered two data points. The first data point was the SEI (2014) as a pre and post assessment tool to measure and monitor student's engagement in different literacy activities over the course of the six week period. The second data point was the use of the DRA2 and DRAPM to monitor student reading achievement in association with their engagement.

### *Presentation of the Findings*

At the onset of the research project, 21 students were assessed using the SEI (2014) (see Figure 4) in combination with the coding key (see Figure 5) three times during different reading related tasks. Each initial survey was conducted during a free read block, a collaboration reading block, and a response to reading block.

Figure 6 represents engagement survey results from pretest to posttest. The range of time students remained engaged during pre-testing was from zero to 20 minutes. The mean time for students being engaged during literacy related tasks at pretesting was 16.2 minutes. To demonstrate this, 33% (n=7) were engaged for 17 minutes or more, which was above the mean, and 66.7% (n=14) of the students were engaged for 16 minutes or less, which was below the mean.

At posttesting, 21 students were reassessed. The range of time students were engaged during reading related tasks at post testing was from ten to 30 minutes (see Figure 6). The mean

time for students being engaged during reading related tasks at posttesting was 23.6 minutes. At this time, 66.7% (n=14) students were engaged for 25 minutes or more, which was greater than the mean while 33.3% of students (n=7) were engaged for 20 minutes or less, which was below the mean. One student demonstrated a growth of engaging in text from pretest to posttest from ten minutes during the pretest to 25 minutes during the posttest; a 15 minute increase of engagement. On the other hand, another student was engaged in a text for 25 minutes during the pretest, and only ten minutes during the posttest showing a decrease in engagement over time. This decrease can be attributed to a dislike in her text, or poor seating choice on this specific day. Analysis of the mean scores from pre to posttesting revealed a 7.4 minute increase, which indicates that the strategies of choice, authentic tasks, and collaboration were effective in increasing engagement during literacy related tasks.

To measure reading achievement, students' DRA2 scores were compiled. Figure 7 represents DRA2 scores from fall to winter assessments. A total of 21 students were assessed on the DRA2. All students scored at a level 38 or higher, which is equivalent to two levels below the fifth grade benchmark. None of the students scored in the needs improvement range at the time of the pretest.

The range of scores at pretesting was from a 38 to a 60. The mean score for students assessed at pretesting was 40, which is the fifth grade benchmark in the fall. At this point, 38% (n=8) of students scored a level 50 or 60 on the DRA2 which is one to two levels above the mean, and is exceeding benchmark at this time (see Figure 7). At the same time, 29% (n=6) of students scored a level 38, which is below the mean, and in the approaching standards range for this time of the year in fifth grade. Therefore, 33% (n=7) of students met the mean with a DRA2 level of a 40 at pretesting.

There were 21 students who were reassessed at posttesting. The scores at posttesting ranged from a level 38 to a level 60. The mean score at posttesting was a level 50, which is the winter benchmark for fifth grade. The data shows, 43% (n=9) of students scored below benchmark with a DRA2 level of 38 or 40. At this point, only one student still remained at a DRA2 level of a 38 from pre to posttesting. This student did not show any growth through the intervention period. While the students reading at a level 40 on the DRA2 at posttesting did not meet the winter benchmark, 23.8% (n=5) of those students progressed from a level 38 to a level 40 during the intervention time frame, demonstrating one level of growth over the intervention period.

Analyzing further, four of the students who were reading at a level 40 during the pretest, progressed to a level 50 at the conclusion of the six week intervention. The other student remained at a level 50 but progressed in reading sub-skills within the 50 band. At the end of the intervention period, 24% (n=5) of students were meeting benchmark standards with a DRA2 score of 50.

Meanwhile, 33.3% (n=7) scored above benchmark with a level of a DRA2 60. Therefore, 57% of students (n=12) met or achieved the benchmark for fifth grade. Analysis of the mean scores from pre to posttesting revealed an increase in students DRA2 levels from pretest to post test.

## **Part 5: Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusions**

### *Overview*

Researchers unanimously agree that three non-negotiable requirements need to be in place in order for students to be successful readers: There needs to be collaboration, authenticity and choice in reading for students to be successful (Duke et al., 2006; Guthrie et al., 1996; Guthrie, 2011; Guthrie, 2015; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Kim et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was to study the effects of engagement strategies that fostered student motivation in order to increase reading achievement in fifth grade students. During the six week intervention, students participated in book clubs and book talks, a variety of assessments, and peer discourse that incorporated different engagement strategies. The engagement tools allowed students to learn about their own learning style as well developing a bank of strategies that worked best for them.

### *Discussion*

Guthrie's principles of engagement are well in evidence when responding to the overarching research questions, (1) "what are effective strategies to increase overall student engagement in reading," and (2) "Which strategies motivate and engage older struggling readers?" For example, students used metacognitive strategies to build understanding and became active thinkers, particularly when discussing text (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Guthrie, as cited by Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Based on this theory, students were evaluated to the extent to which they were engaged through different reading activities including independent reading, book club discussions, and authentic tasks, through the SEI (2014) instrument.

Through the use of collaboration, choice, and authenticity, (Anderson & Guthrie, 1996 as cited by Tracey & Morrow, 2006; Parsons et al. (2015); Robertson et al. (2014)), students learned to become actively engaged in reading related activities. Key aspects of instruction were used to support engagement such as the integration of skills and content, hands on activities, a variety of text choices, more collaboration with peers, and increasing independence (Guthrie & Kluda, 2014; Kim et al., 2016; Tracey & Morrow, 2006).

In addition, the purpose of authentic tasks was of importance to the students while reading. Students appeared more interested and engaged in deep discourse with peers when tasks were authentic and could connect the classroom to their daily lives. For example, students conducted debates, wrote letters to the editor, analyzed current events, and conducted book club discussions. Through these authentic tasks, students used collaboration with peers and authentic discourse to deepen their understanding.

During literacy based activities, behavioral engagement was measured through teacher observation of student effort, attention, and dedication to academic tasks (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Kim et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2015) through the SEI (2014). However, the instrument only provided one aspect of a child's engagement in reading, does not necessarily consider whether the student is fully-engaged in the task. For students to increase academically, they need to be cognitively engaged (Guthrie & Kluda, 2014) where they enhance their metacognitive effectiveness of the text (2014; Parsons et al., 2015). The extent to which students used metacognitive awareness was determined as well through teacher observations of student excitement and desire to complete tasks, and through reading assessments created by the students themselves.

Guthrie and Wigfield's research on choice in literacy supported the evidence in responding to the research question, "What impact does choice have on student engagement?" For example, students had choice over texts that interested them, a voice in how they shared ideas and theories about texts in personal and meaningful ways to increase their engagement within reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Guthrie et al., 2012). Students increased their engagement through different constructs. These included a focus on specific concepts rather than individualized reading skills, students initiating their own learning through question generation, allowing different opportunities for choice within literacy and collaborative aspect of working with peers (Guthrie et al., 1996). In addition, students had choices over the genre and text they read, different seating options and creating their own tasks and/assessments to demonstrate their learning.

Students participated in book clubs in selecting books of their own choosing, which allowed for authentic discourse. Through the use of video recording, students self-monitored their engagement within the collaborative work while setting goals for themselves. The video recording tool also allowed students to engage themselves in their own learning through intrinsic motivation which also builds their self-efficacy.

Through choice, students took ownership over their own learning. By allowing them to sit wherever they wanted during reading activities and choose their own texts, their engagement increased. Even through task design, students were able to demonstrate knowledge of their learning through their own choice of assessment. Students' excitement in the classroom climbed, and their desire soared when they were able to choose their own assessment. Their ownership over their learning became more powerful and authentic.

In classrooms where teachers relinquish control, students develop deeper connections to content and engage in academic tasks because they are empowered through choice (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010).

### *Recommendations for Action*

The initial findings of this study will be shared at both the school and district level as part of future professional development for reading achievement associated with disengaged students in literacy based tasks for elementary grades. With use of the curriculum specialists and reading department, conversations with administration will stress the importance of student engagement and the direct correlation to student reading achievement.

In addition, the findings will also be shared at the school level with all elementary grade teachers. Over the course of the year, teachers have been studying and analyzing student reading data and questioning the decrease of reading achievement school wide. The constructs found, along with further strategies, will be presented to the teachers to promote engagement within reading to help with academic achievement.

Even though the sample size was small, given the size and diversity of the class, this action-research confirmed the benefits of including choice, collaboration and authenticity within reading instruction to increase student engagement. Students increased their reading achievement through engagement strategies. Students continued to apply strategies taught, throughout all literacy based tasks. Students who are motivated internally have their own desires and interests that they can access through reading, allowing them to remain engaged and motivated to do well (Guthrie & Humenick, 2014).

### *Recommendations for Further Study*

Next steps for research would include a comparison of two or more fifth grade in which the implementation of choice, authenticity and collaboration were used as strategies to increase reading engagement as the dependent variable in a study. The daily use of these strategies along with use of the SEI (2014) would determine the extent to which reading engagement was achieved.

Another step for research would be to use a larger sample size of upper elementary grade students using reading engagement strategies daily within their classroom. I will work with teachers in grades four through six to plan another study in which engagement strategies will be included in their daily literacy instruction. Using a larger sample size will determine the effectiveness of these engagement strategies on students' reading achievement.

### *Conclusion*

Reading engagement demonstrates the involvement and ownership students have in their own reading development (Marchand & Furrer, 2014; Wigfield, et al., 2008). For students to build successful futures, remain employed after college and become lifelong learners, students need to be engaged in the classroom starting in elementary school, where the initial decline is noticed (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Kuh, et al., 2008; Naeghel, et al., 2012). This study, confirmed the importance of the use of engagement strategies within the classroom to increase reading achievement along with student motivation, while providing educators with instructional tools to implement that results in increased motivation, self-efficacy, and engagement within literacy based tasks. In conclusion, when teachers include goal setting, choice, and collaboration into their daily instructional routine, student engagement and motivation increases. I conclude

that further professional development in engagement will support students increase in reading achievement.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

Figure 1. Excerpt from *McGuffey's Fifth Eclectic Reader*



1. THE GOOD READER.

11. "As for you, my young lady," continued the King, "I know you will ask no better reward for your trouble than the pleasure of carrying to this poor widow my order for her son's immediate discharge. Let me see whether you can write as well as you can read. Take this pen, and write as I dictate." He then dictated an order, which Ernestine wrote, and he signed. Calling one of his guards, he bade him go with the girl and see that the order was obeyed.

12. How much happiness was Ernestine the means of bestowing through her good elocution, united to the happy circumstance that brought it to the knowledge of the King! First, there were her poor neighbors, to whom she could give instruction and entertainment. Then, there was the poor widow who sent the petition, and who not only regained her son, but received through Ernestine an order for him to paint the King's likeness; so that the poor boy soon rose to great distinction, and had more orders than he could attend to. Words could not express his gratitude, and that of his mother, to the little girl.

13. And Ernestine had, moreover, the satisfaction of aiding her father to rise in the world, so that he became the King's chief gardener. The King did not forget her, but had her well educated at his own expense. As for the two pages, she was indirectly the means of doing them good, also; for, ashamed of their bad reading, they commenced studying in earnest, till they overcame the faults that had offended the King. Both finally rose to distinction, one as a lawyer, and the other as a statesman; and they owed their advancement in life chiefly to their good elocution.

DEFINITIONS.—1. Po-ſi-tion, a formal request. 2. Am-bi-gu-ous, is with the elementary sounds. Mi-li-tar-y, to carry or inflict. Mo-ſti-cous, lack of curiosity. 4. Al-tar-nate, unusual and odd.





Figure 5.

Coding System for Engagement Survey

**Engagement Coding**

B = Bathroom

C = Chatting

E = Engaged

L = Looking around

SB = Switching Books

T = Looking at the teacher

W = Writing

Z = Zoning out

**Appendix B: Graphs & Tables**

Figure 6.

Engagement Survey Results from Pretest to Posttest

Engagement Results

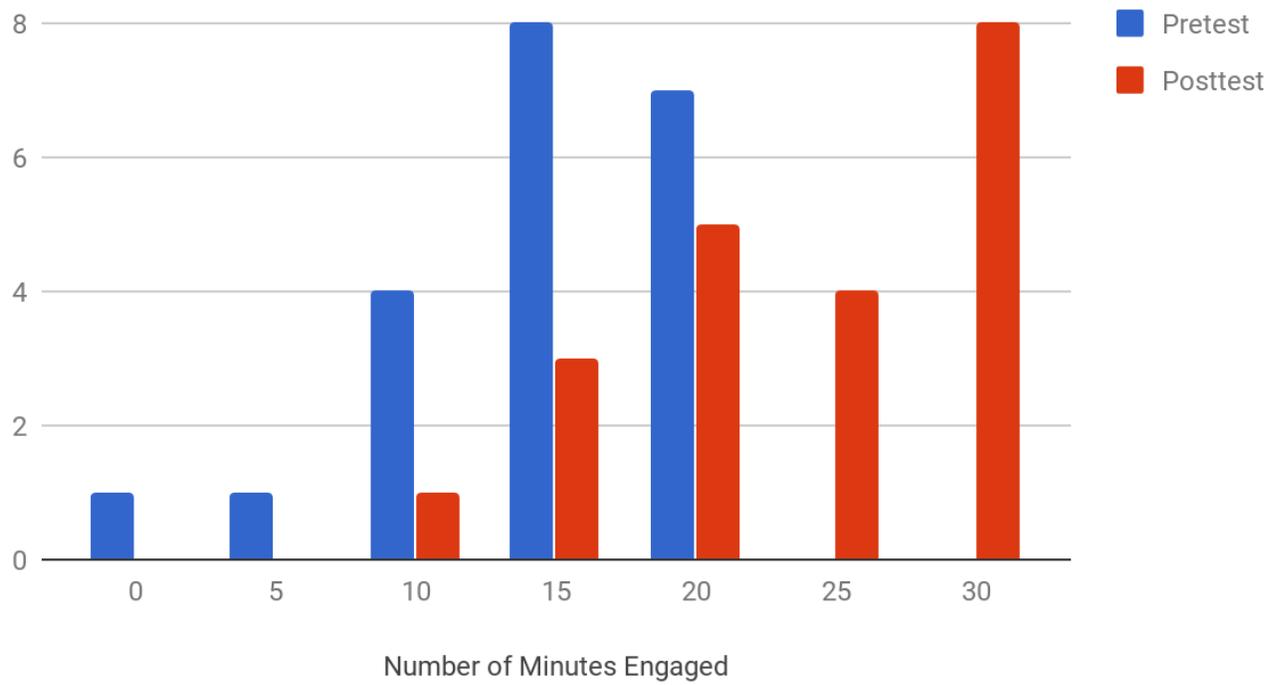


Figure 7.

DRA2 Scores from Fall to Winter

DRA2 Scores from Fall to Winter

